



## *Fathers of the Nation: Barack Obama Addresses Nelson Mandela*

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*Over 30 years ago, while still a student, I learned of Mandela and the struggles in this land. It stirred something in me. It woke me up to my responsibilities – to others, and to myself – and set me on an improbable journey that finds me here today.*

With these simple words, uttered at the Nelson Mandela Memorial on December 10, 2013 in Soweto, President Barack Obama publicly acknowledged his debt to the South African leader, positioning Mandela at the very beginning of his “journey” towards “here today.” The present Obama makes reference to is not only the moment when he gave this speech, that is, when he was invited to speak in front of thousands of South Africans and many world state leaders gathered to commemorate the late South African man. “Here today” indicates the “improbable” and unimaginable course of events that made him the first African American president of the United States, his appointment being what he himself defined “America’s improbable experiment in democracy” (“A More Perfect Union”). The presence of the younger black president at the Mandela Memorial calls to mind inevitable comparisons, the most striking and easily visible being their racial inscription, which, when combined with their political role, makes them the two first black presidents of their respective countries. However, together the two presidents also evoke the possibility of overcoming racially-defined abuses and of making the black history of exploitation visible within their respective national genealogy.



In his semi-autobiographical *Dreams from My Father*, Obama states that “our sense of wholeness would have to arise from something more fine than the bloodlines we’d inherited” (1995: 204); in line with his words, I will tackle here the Obama and Mandela relationship as one of the symbolic genealogies, where Obama makes use of Nelson Mandela as a fictive father in order to reinforce his own political agenda. The Nelson Mandela Memorial address will be the main focus of this essay, which is also informed by other seminal texts containing Obama’s political and personal creed, such as his book *Dreams from My Father* and his speech “A More Perfect Union” (2008). This combined reading helps to understand Mandela’s transnational power, which Obama uses to comment on the United States by comparing the South African leader to other American “fathers of the nation.” Thus, he uproots Mandela from a specifically South African legacy, expands his figure, and addresses him as a transnational father of his own nation, whose power, influence, and example transcend South African borders. As “a giant of history, who moved a nation toward justice, and in the process moved billions around the world” (Nelson Mandela Memorial), Mandela is therefore a source of inspiration not only for South Africans, but also for people around the globe. His story and struggle is a model not only for those who can identify with him from a racial point of view, but also for “people of every race and walk of life.” As a consequence of this enlargement and transnational validation of Mandela’s figure, the speech delivered at the Memorial falls outside South Africa’s history and rather becomes an occasion to tackle America’s past and future; despite the commemorative moment, the tribute to the African President and his driving example in Obama’s life serve to reinforce previous positions conveyed in other discourses by the American President, such as the “A More Perfect Union” speech delivered in Philadelphia in 2008.

Obama’s announcement during Mandela’s Memorial comes at the end of a long relationship of admiration and esteem that he had already expressed over the years. On different occasions Obama has attested Mandela’s role as a political example and situated him at the very beginning of his political career when, as a college student in California, he became politically active and “joined a campaign on behalf of divestment, and the effort to end apartheid in South Africa” (Mandela 2010: xi). In the American President’s foreword to *Conversations with Myself*, the last collection of Mandela’s autobiographical writings published in collaboration with the Nelson Mandela Centre for Memory and Dialogue, Obama defines himself as “one of those people who tried to answer his [Mandela’s] call” (Mandela 2010: xi). Despite such a long-established political relation, Obama met Mandela only once, on May 17, 2005, when the South African president was in Washington and Obama was a young and newly elected Illinois senator.<sup>1</sup> Two other Mandela-moments follow in Obama’s life: in

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<sup>1</sup> <<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/obama-mourns-nelson-mandela-he-belongs-to-the-ages/>>, visited on April 25, 2014; Hennessey’s “The Obama-Mandela Dynamic, Reflected in a Photo.” <<http://articles.latimes.com/2013/jun/25/nation/la-na-obama-mandela-20130625>>, visited on June 1, 2014.



2006, when he was in Africa and visited Robben Island, the prison where Mandela was detained for eighteen of his twenty-seven years of imprisonment; in 2013, when, as a part of a three-nation trip in Africa, Obama visited Senegal and its *Maison des esclaves* on Gorée Island, and later paid a second visit to Robben Island's penal colony. A personal consultation with the political leader was avoided, as Mandela was already in hospital at the time. In 2011, First Lady Michelle Obama, accompanied by her two daughters Malia and Sasha, visited South Africa and met its leader. The photo of Michelle Obama, sitting on the arm of Mandela's chair, together with her two daughters, radiates an air of familiarity, which reaches beyond their respective roles as representatives of the two nations. The first visual impact of the picture evokes three different generations of black people and three declinations of the transnational fights for freedom: Mandela's generation, who started those fights in the 1950s and 1960s, Michelle Obama's generation, inheritor of those achievements, and Malia and Sasha, a projection of a hopefully color-blind future to come. As is the case with many of Obama's writings and speeches, symbolism exceeds reality, and this symbolic visualization of Mandela as surrogate racial ancestor enables us to enter the tricky terrain of racial inscription and ancestry.

The first and most immediate connection between the two men comes by means of their racial phenotype, which in its turn reflects on Obama's geographical genealogy and his family history. As is widely known, Obama is African via his father line. Barack Obama Sr. was a student from Kenya when he met Obama's mother in Hawaii. Many have objected that, because of his family's history, Obama is to be considered bi-racial, rather than African American, as he himself checked in the 2010 census form.<sup>2</sup> Reflecting on this issue in *Dreams from My Father*, he writes: "I ceased to advertise my mother's race at the age of twelve or thirteen, when I began to suspect that by doing so I was ingratiating myself to whites" (Obama 1995: xv). In an article on Obama's race, scholar Reginald G. Daniel similarly recalled that "multiracial identity has historically been suppressed in the United States through the rule of hypodescent" (Daniel 2009: 52).<sup>3</sup> The fact that Obama is phenotypically black therefore places him on the African American side of the nation, which is further reinforced by the slavery past he inherits via his spouse Michelle Obama.<sup>4</sup> Despite Obama's African lineage, there has been only a small amount of 'Africanness' in the president's life as a child and a young man raised by his white grandparents in Hawaii and in his mother's multiracial family

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<sup>2</sup> <[http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/03/us/politics/03census.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/03/us/politics/03census.html?_r=0)>, visited on June 6, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> In the case of African Americans, hypodescent has been known as the "one-drop-rule," according to which one drop of African blood makes you black.

<sup>4</sup> As Obama says in his "A More Perfect Union" speech, "I am married to a black American who carries within her the blood of slaves and slave-owners – an inheritance we pass on to our two precious daughters." The question of slavery in Barack Obama's genealogy is actually more complex, since genetic research carried out by Ancestry.com links Barack Obama himself to John Punch, one of those first Africans who lived and worked as indentured servants in Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619, by way of his white mother. <<http://www.ancestry.com/obama>>, visited on October 5, 2013.



in Indonesia. According to biographer Davis Maraniss and to Obama's recollections in *Dreams from My Father*, the young Obama met his father only once, and only as a grown-up man did he visit his kinsfolk in Kenya. However, as the President himself states in his memoir, it was his father's image that set in motion a first sequence of correspondences among race, geography, and politics. "It was into my father's image, the black man, son of Africa," says Obama, "that I'd packed all the attributes I sought in myself, the attributes of Martin and Malcolm, DuBois and Mandela" (Obama 1995: 220). The transitivity and congruity between these black men (Barack Obama Sr., Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, W.E.B. DuBois, and Nelson Mandela) found by a young Obama searching for his black identity authorizes us to identify the African ex-President as a surrogate father of sorts. There would be much to say if we followed the question of racial parallels and significance. For example, as South African President Jacob Zuma is reported saying, "you both carry the dreams of millions of people in Africa and in the diaspora who were previously oppressed" (Smith-Spark 2013), thus bridging the question of their racial connection with the historical transatlantic uses of racialization in the service of capitalism. However, as I will briefly show, racial inscription is sidestepped in Obama's Memorial speech. The question of "race", in other words, is but an initial step in the process of comparison, one which triggers a number of other questions implied in Obama's speech. In a comparative analysis of the two politicians' life, color comes to signify a number of political, civil, and humanitarian struggles that reach well beyond their individuality and personal location within the race house.

Although the racial significance of Obama's and Mandela's endeavor is not to be dismissed, Obama does not linger on their connection via race, but instead develops it on the level of national and international history. As we shall see, Obama uses personal racial identity to reflect on their respective national histories, moving his speech from personal homage to national commentary, from race as a source of identity to race as a matter of national justice. Focusing on the national level, the American President stated in Soweto that South Africa and the United States are indeed connected by means of the two countries' racial histories. "We know that like South Africa," Obama recalls, "the United States had to overcome centuries of racial subjugation. As was true here, it took the sacrifice of countless people – known and unknown – to see the dawn of a new day." Taking distance from the question of personal genealogy (that is, Obama's lived legacy of Mandela's example as a racial father he can connect to other paternal figures in his life), race is presented as a national matter, which informs the history of their countries. An extended connection is thus established, which functions not only on the racial but also on the political level, to the extent that Obama describes himself as the fruit of those struggles Mandela fought personally. If "Michelle and I are the beneficiaries of that struggle" (Obama 2013), Obama is a "son" of that liberating movement, inhabiting a world created by people like Mandela, one of the fathers of the twentieth-century fights for racial equality.



The question of surrogate racial and geographical fatherhood, when read as a symbol of the struggles of the oppressed and in connection to national history, brings to the forefront the questions of what national genealogy one establishes as significant in the national past. From personal “fatherly” example (because older, black, and from Africa), Mandela becomes an elective/adoptive political father, who provides the occasion for a consideration of American official national fathers. Suspending a critical analysis of Mandela’s political achievement, which would have been out of place in a commemorative and celebrative occasion as the Memorial, Obama establishes a list of similarities between the South African leader and Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Abraham Lincoln and, finally, the United States’ founding fathers; Obama thus enlarges Mandela’s value diachronically and geographically, reducing the historical specificities of the South African leader to incorporate him in a possible transnational American political genealogy. The quotation, within the same public discourse, of white founding fathers, of the American black leader of the Civil Rights movement, and of an African transnational father, as Mandela is, calls for a new reasoning on how we deal with the history of the nation, how we imagine ancestors, and how Obama tries to move beyond the narrative of black citizens’ denied legal, social, and human space within the American nation. As is typical of Obama’s politics, his personal history iconically embodies the racial question and its applied political meanings, while at the same time he rhetorically “transcend[s] race and speak[s] to the nation’s common destiny” (Daniel 2009: 56).

In the three correspondences Obama traces in the Memorial speech, the comparison to Gandhi and Martin Luther King may be expected, as the three men historically belong to the twentieth-century battles for the abolishment of colonial and segregated societies. Regardless of the fact that he never ruled the nation for whose independence he fought, Gandhi is considered the mentor of post-colonial India; similarly, Mandela is widely acknowledged as the father of post-apartheid South Africa, which he served as the first black president from 1994 to 1999. In this regard, India and South Africa inscribe their new course on the person of these combatants for political and civil rights. The two political leaders function as a new civic icon, celebrated and memorialized as the foundational myth of a new historical phase: by rendering Mandela and Gandhi the repositories of the national and shared historical past, their countries amend their civic memory, transfiguring the two men into monuments marking the beginning of a new civic era. As Verne Harris emphasizes in the book *Conversations with Myself*, even if late in the years Mandela became the emblem of the South African nation, not only of a specific group. He is, in other words, the representative of an epic journey that must be focused on the creation of the future, part of the nation’s mythology, and repository of the civic meaning of a new South Africa.

Differently from both India and South Africa, the United States has lacked such a strong figure able to stand as the father of the new direction of the nation. In this





respect, the symbolical force of Obama's presidency – regardless of the actual results of his two mandates – comes a generation later with respect to South Africa, despite the short chronological distance between Mandela's and Obama's elections as the first black presidents of their nations. His lack of a biographical relation with the Civil Rights and desegregation years figuratively presents Obama as an orphaned heir of those struggles. It is precisely because of the different civil rights history of the United States that this reading of Mandela as a putative (inter)national, racial, geographical, and political father is justified and explained. Differently from South Africa, desegregation in the United States coincided with the killing of its leader, Martin Luther King Jr. The premature deaths of the still young King (he was 39 when he was killed in 1968) and Malcolm X (40 in 1965) establish a genealogical void between the revolutionary 1960s and the post-racial millennium marked by the election of US first black President. While, in this sense, Obama is the inheritor of those years' civil, emancipatory, and racial struggles, he is at the same time an orphaned descendant from a political point of view, having those initial fighters died before being acknowledged as symbolic re-founders of the nation and its civic myth. Even the 1986 establishment of the Martin Luther King Day and the choice of February and October as the months for Black History come as compromised moments of civic memory, given the grassroots suspicions of the state's involvement in their killings. Whereas in South Africa the political agitator was finally invested of the presidency, such a symbolic recognition never happened in the United States and was symbolically substituted by the election of Obama a generation later. In spite of their scant personal relationship and their different nations, Mandela can therefore function as a filler between the 1960s struggles for racial equality and the contemporary US, which has seen at least the partial success of those fights.

Although Madiba is appropriated as an outcome of the politics of the 1960s, he is also something more and different if compared with the history of the Civil Rights Movement in the US. His "legacy of racial reconciliation" (Obama 2013) is indeed contrary to that "challenging" attitude that is "often embodied in the civil rights tradition of leadership" and that "confronts whites with the injustices perpetuated against blacks" (Daniel 2009: 51). The problem with this American attitude, incompatible with Obama's utopic vision of a unite and "more perfect" nation, is visible in his relationship with Reverend Wright, which contrasts Obama's celebration of Mandela as a father figure. In the "A More Perfect Union" speech, and as he had already written in *Dreams from My Father*, Obama describes Reverend Wright as a paternal figure, who introduced him to his religious faith and who was active during the years of the Civil Rights. However, in that same famous Philadelphia speech, called to comment on Reverend Wright's "incendiary language" against white America, Obama condemned Wright's stances as divisive along racial lines. As he said, "Reverend Wright's comments were not only wrong but divisive, divisive at a time when we need unity; racially charged at a time when we need to come together."



Reverend Wright might have functioned as a father of sorts, establishing that connection with the 1960s. Yet for “the men and women of Reverend Wright’s generation, the memories of humiliation and doubt and fear have not gone away; nor has the anger and the bitterness of those years” (Obama 2008). This constitutes the problematic knot posed by the Reverend Wright’s Civil rights example, which Obama can subside through the inscription of Mandela within his political (and racial) genealogy.

It is in this line of thinking that, sidestepping a precise historical analysis of the South African leader’s political life, from a rhetorical and symbolical point of view Mandela becomes a useful adoptive political father for the American President and his hoped-for new course of the American nation. Adding to the tradition of America and, specifically, black America’s sympathetic relationship with Africa, Obama employs Mandela’s exemplary life to reinforce his and US policy. As a matter of fact, Mandela’s example, in terms of political and civil effort becomes a living monumental frame which functions as a mediation between Obama’s present political rhetoric and the still divisive United States’ Civil Rights past. On the one hand, Mandela is chronologically and politically connected to those past struggles for racial equality, and can therefore become a surrogate “father,” filling the void left by the death of the 1960s American leaders. On the other hand, Mandela’s ability to stand as president and father of a nation beyond racial division offers Obama the opportunity to develop that “reconciliatory politics” he considers fundamental for the US national unity. Madiba, in other words, provides the possibility of bringing together the younger President’s and their two countries’ similarly difficult pasts while reversing racial stigma in broad political action valid for the whole nation and not only for its racial segments. If the memory of the Civil Rights years still projects racial polarization, Mandela’s mythicized persona and his legacy foreground racial equality, reconciliation, and national union as possible, differently from the still divisive rhetoric of Reverend Wright’s sermons.

Madiba is the indication that this turning away from “white domination” and “black domination”, towards “a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities”<sup>5</sup> is possible (Obama 2013). The question of the “possibility” of change, central in Obama’s 2008 campaign, is also an attribute he sees in the South African man. As he said in his public statement from the White House, immediately after receiving notice of Mandela’s death, the South African leader was an “example that people and countries and governments can change for the better.”<sup>6</sup> He therefore symbolically leads the path of national perfectibility and

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<sup>5</sup> Mandela’s words as reported by Barack Obama during the Nelson Mandela Memorial Address.

<sup>6</sup> White House Press Release: “His journey from a prisoner to a President embodied the promise that human beings – and countries – can change for the better. His commitment to transfer power and reconcile with those who jailed him set an example that all humanity should aspire to, whether in the lives of nations or our own personal lives.”



hope, typical of Obama's reclamation of the American political dream and contrary to Reverend Wright's political resignation. Obama reflects on this in a passage of "A More Perfect Union" speech, which is worth of quoting at length:

The profound mistake of Reverend Wright's sermons is not that he spoke about racism in our society. It's that he spoke as if our society was static; as if no progress has been made; as if this country – a country that has made it possible for one of his own members to run for the highest office in the land and build a coalition of white and black; Latino and Asian, rich and poor, young and old – is still irrevocably bound to a tragic past. But what we know – what we have seen – is that America can change. That is true genius of this nation. What we have already achieved gives us hope – the audacity to hope – for what we can and must achieve tomorrow. (Obama 2008)

"It was precisely because he could admit to imperfection," Obama declares, that Mandela becomes such a valuable political forefather: admission to imperfection means perfectibility, possibility, but also the acknowledgement that as citizens we are still marching towards that "more perfect" ideal of democracy. In this sense, the new course of the nation, after the 1960s' struggles for equality, is only another point towards the utopic reduction of "that gap between the promise of our ideals and the reality of [...] time." In other words, the 1960s are not to be considered as a break with the past: they do not function as a cathartic moment in the national memory cleansing the past and preparing a new beginning. On the contrary, they are but an example of the possible narrowing of the gap between whites and blacks, between principles and their manifestations. Rhetorically Obama thus blurs the confines of racial and national matters, in a continuum where the removal of racial discrimination and national purification coincide. He therefore inscribes Mandela within the dimension of the American political progress, which, in its utopian movement towards perfection, paradoxically fortifies the past foundational texts and, as a consequence, national unity.

Mandela and the 1960s' legacies can hence integrate with a longer genealogy of national forefathers, such as Lincoln and the founding fathers. Given that the 1960s and their heritage are not presented as a stirring away from the national course, but a turning back towards the original pureness of its mission, we should not be surprised if, after the parallel with King, Obama likens Mandela to Abraham Lincoln, the American president who was responsible for both the end of the institution of slavery and the post-Civil War unification of the nation. In this line of comparison, race is obviously not what Lincoln and Mandela share; what they have in common is the utopian fight against racial discrimination and, at the same time, the utopian drive to unify the nation. If, like Lincoln, Mandela "h[e]ld his country together when it threatened to break apart" (Nelson Mandela Memorial), racial equality and emancipation become necessary conditions of the two presidents' fights for healthy





national constructions against sectarian aims. Besides the question of race and reconciliation, the reference to Lincoln actually reinforces the third principle of Obama's politics, that is the "perfectibility way." In this regard, Lincoln's words at Gettysburg (1863) are telling: "It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us." While Lincoln is considered the initiator of a post-slavery United States, at Gettysburg he stated that his was not a reformation of the nation, but the accomplishment of those initial words contained in the Jeffersonian Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, those documents "where the perfection begins" (Obama, "A More Perfect Union"). In this sense, and in the tradition of American political speeches, the Civil War, as well as the Civil Rights battles, are not moments of reconstruction of the nation, but a return to the original truths, validity, and creed of the founding documents. The fight for racial equality is therefore not a struggle against the US, but a struggle for the US to progressively become itself and live up to its great imaginative and utopic beginning.

In this sense, racial discourses are reinscribed within the national history, reinforcing the shift from race as a category one personally inhabits and a condition that determines one's fights (we can compare Mandela, Obama, and King because they are black and fought for their own and their group's emancipation), to race equality as a national condition necessary for the realization and maintenance of the union. In our analysis we are therefore moving from race as a personal link between Mandela and Obama (as a young man searching for his black identity), to the national relevance of the racial question (implicit in the public figures of blackness Mandela and King are), to race as a national matter and race equality as the basis for national unity, consequential for everyone and not only for the racialized sector and memory of the country. The comparison to Lincoln thus further moves the pendulum from race as a divisive factor to "races" (black and white, but potentially also others) as a possible base for national unity, transforming the tension for racial equality into the tension for the implementation of American foundational principles.

This becomes the implicit premise for a third comparison between Mandela and the United States' founding fathers, which puts further distance between the memorial as a moment for remembering the South African leader and the memorial as an occasion to reflect on American political history. "Like America's founding fathers," Obama states, Mandela "would erect a constitutional order to preserve freedom for future generations." The connection to America's founding fathers fosters more subtle reflection on discourses of how we imagine modern democracies, how we deal with an inherited national past that may be troubling for a part of the citizenry, and how Obama reconciles future and past in his national vision. Despite their role as political fathers of the nation, American founding fathers' achievement has been questioned in more recent years, as their faith in universal freedom is tainted by the hidden reality of slavery. Obama himself admits that the document they produced "was eventually



signed but ultimately unfinished. It was stained by this nation's original sin of slavery, a question that divided the colonies and brought the convention to a stalemate until the founders chose to allow the slave trade to continue for at least twenty more years, and to leave any final resolution to future generations" (Obama 2008). Comparing Mandela, the symbolical chosen founder of post-apartheid South Africa, to those white American founders who kept away from the thorny problem of slavery, is unexpected, at best. However, it also indicates Obama's desire to stress Mandela's ability to go beyond one's peculiarities for the creation of a united nation. In this sense, the American Declaration of Independence and the Constitution become more important than their historical limitations, their message more significant than their racial shortcomings. As Mandela "was not afraid to compromise for the sake of a larger goal,"<sup>7</sup> even the founding fathers can be amended from their imperfect accomplishment of freedom as the beginners of a path that Americans, as their children, are called to continue and perfect. In the tradition of the American jeremiad, the initial civic pact, contained in those foundational words of the Declaration of Independence is hence reinforced as an investment for the future.

Son of a white mother and an African father, and also thanks to his personal interest in Mandela's figure, Obama can therefore embody race while transcending it in his political agenda. He is in this sense able to "speak to the nation's common destiny" (Daniel 2009: 56) in racial and at the same time post-racial terms. The expanding circles of comparisons, from his father to Mandela to King to Lincoln to the founding fathers, enables him to overcome the racial declination of Mandela's example. The Memorial address gives him the opportunity of controlling racial instances and calling for a long path to come for the achievement of that national unity, as he had already fostered in other public speeches. Instead of capitalizing on certain divisive stances that are still implicit in the memory of the Civil Rights times in American memory, Mandela offers a useful discursive support, which talks of race yet manages to put it in perspective. Questions of personal, racial, and political example are therefore enchained in a continuum which reinforces Obama's post-racial attitude and calls for a shared effort to accomplish that unfinished work started by people like the founding fathers, Lincoln, King, and Mandela. In this sense, the reinscription of this South African discourse within other examples of Obama's life and policy explains how the American president makes use of Mandela's history to support the utopian and political dimension of his career as the first black, but undeniably American, President of the United States. By using the South African word *Ubuntu*, which describes that "we are all bound together in ways that can be invisible to the eye; that there is a oneness to humanity," Obama confirms his reconciliatory position as a necessary step towards the still utopian "more perfect union."

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<sup>7</sup> Since the South African constitution "was worthy of this multiracial democracy; true to [Mandela's] vision of laws that protect minority as well as majority rights, and the precious freedoms of every South African" (Obama 2013), Obama transfers those same attributes also to the American one.



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