

Rewriting the tragic mulatto



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Colson Whitehead's novel *Sag Harbor* (2009) and Barack Obama's memoirs *Dreams From My Father* (1995) both tell a portion of the complicated story of race and race relations in America. The main characters in both of these novels have experiences of being the "tragic mulatto" in their cultures. For *Sag Harbor*'s Benji Cooper, he must find a balance between the black community he is a part of in the summer and the white community he lives in during the school year. For Barack Obama, a man of mixed race, he attempts to find an identity and a place in his family and as a black man in America. Both Benji Cooper's and Barack Obama's stories blur the reader's sense of conventional racial boundaries in order to prove that race is not an easily defined or constrained issue, but rather it has many connotations and it permeates throughout different societies.

During the school year, Benji Cooper attends a predominantly white prep school in Manhattan. The school has a dress code where the students have to wear ties and dress clothes to class. Benji describes another person's reaction to his appearance when dressed for school as, "an old white man stopped us on a corner and asked us if we were the sons of a diplomat. Little princes of an African country. The U. N. being half a mile away. Because- why else would black people dress like that" (4)? Yet despite how the clothing he wears does not allow him to fit in on the streets, and the fact that being one of the few black kids in his school makes him feel like an outsider, every summer he finds his escape in Sag Harbor, a small Hamptons' community that generations of African Americans have claimed as their own sanctuary. He knows that this lavish lifestyle is not that of a typical young African American man. He states, "According to the world, we were the definition of

paradox: black boys with beach houses. A paradox to the outside, but it never occurred to us that there was anything strange about it" (57). Though this type of affluent lifestyle may not be the first thing that comes to mind when most people think of black culture, for Benji and his friends, this aspect of their lives is completely normal, because it is all they have ever known.

Occasionally Benji looks back with hindsight at these times in Sag Harbor and notices that he and his friend's overcompensate to try and fit the stereotypes of their race. This is partially because on some level they understand that they are cultural mulattos and that their lifestyle is not typical of their race. He notes, " We talked one way in school, one way in our homes, and another way to each other. We got guns. We got guns for a few days one summer and then got rid of them. Later some of us got real guns" (147). As Benji reflects back on the difficulties that came with being a cultural mulatto, he realizes that the different ways of handling their race ended better for some of his friends than it did for others. At one point in the novel Benji notes, " You could embrace the black part-take some idea you had about what real blackness was...act hard, act out, act in a way that would come to be called gangsterish, pulling petty crimes...Or you could embrace the contradiction, say, what you call a paradox, I call myself" (59). Though this idea of embracing one's identity and living in balance within both cultures not only seems overly romantic but near impossible, the reader gets the sense that Benji has unapologetically done just that to get by with his friends, family, and schoolmates. Instead of overly concerning himself on issues of race, he chooses to just be himself, whomever that may be at any given moment.

Barack Obama's story of race is also unique in relation to many other African Americans, and this is something he is quite aware of. With a white mother from Kansas and a black father from Kenya, he understands that his lack of "inner city" experience makes his story different as opposed to other stories of race. He consciously explains in his book's introduction, "I can't even hold up my experience as being somehow representative of the black American experience" (xvi). Though some might agree with this statement, there is no one story of race, nor is one person's account more powerful than the next.

The reader is clued in that perhaps some ideas of race and confusion about such a difficult subject are the same everywhere. For example, when Obama's father visits his son's class in Hawaii, he tells the children about the race relations in Kenya. Obama describes this explanation as,

...He told us of Kenya's struggle to be free, how the British had wanted to stay and unjustly rule the people, just as they had in America; how many had been enslaved only because of the color of their skin, just as they had in America; but that Kenyans, like all of us in the room, longed to be free and develop themselves through hard work and sacrifice (70).

In some ways, this statement from his father does allow the reader to view Obama's story of race as the story of race in America. He may not have had a class struggle or "street experience," but he did struggle to fit into society. He may not be able to trace his family back to pre-Civil War slaves in America, but that does not mean that his family was not enslaved. In fact, it is likely that they had experienced oppression at the hand of the white men, either European or American, just as the slaves in America did. Though the

injustices on Obama's family may be a bit hazier than other black Americas, that does not make them non-existent or less important than other stories of race.

The problem for Obama is that he cannot just write off white people as the oppressor and the ones that caused the problems for his race because he is equally as white as he is black. As both a black and a white man, he has to attempt to embrace both of those sides in himself. Yet he finds this difficult for many reasons, including the fact that he has little example of a black community in his life. He notes that, " Away from my mother, away from my grandparents, I was engaged in a fitful interior struggle. I was trying to raise myself to be a black man in America, and beyond the given of my appearance, no one around me seemed to know exactly what that meant" (76). Obama's struggle is further complicated by the fact that he also has to come to terms with the white side of his race. He describes this complication in his life within the context of talking with a black friend. He says, " Sometimes I would find myself talking to Ray about white folks this or white folks that, and I would suddenly remember my mother's smile, and the words I spoke would seem awkward and false" (81). Just as he is unable to negatively stereotype African Americans, Obama cannot really make generalizations about white people either without betraying both himself and his family.

Eventually Obama comes to terms with his multifaceted identity. By the end of the novel he becomes aware that all of his parts come together in a way that is unique to himself and a way that completes him. He states, " I saw that my life in America-the black life, the white life, the sense of

abandonment I'd felt as a boy, the frustration and hope I'd witnessed in Chicago- all of it was connected with this small plot of earth an ocean away, connected by more than the accident of a name or the color of my skin" (430). In order to reconcile the internal argument that has gone on within his own mind when he tried to find out what it means to be black in America, Obama sought to answer what it means to be black in Kenya. Though it was often a long and difficult process, eventually Obama learned how to answer the questions of who he is and who he is not.

Like Benji, in response to his stance as a cultural mulatto and a person of mixed race, Obama learns to adjust to both worlds accordingly. He explains, " I learned to slip back and forth between my black and white worlds, understanding that each possessed its own language and customs and structures of meaning, convinced that with a bit of translation on my part the two worlds would eventually cohere" (82). When both young men discover that neither the black nor the white worlds are impenetrable to them, they learn to accept their positions instead of struggling against it. This way of evolving to their situations seems like an extra challenge that many do not have to deal with in life, but at the same time it seems to have given them a stronger hold on their worlds. Both Obama and Benji do find away to manage it, however, and thus have the freedom to belong, to a point, in both black and white worlds. Their search to find a place within their culture has transformed them from a confused cultural mulatto to an empowered citizen of America. They no longer only identify themselves within the context of their race but as an individual. In this way, neither young man falls in line

with traditional racial boundaries imposed upon them by their societies;
instead they redefine what it means to be a young black man in America.