IV Contemporary Black Travel Narratives

In the previous chapter, I contoured the transnational genre of Black travel writing and pointed to its recurring themes and forms. What is gleaned from the above outline of the genre is that travel writing serves as a means to explore the mobile subject's sense of self against the backdrop of a journey, prompting the definition, affirmation, or negotiation of the traveler-writer's identity while also functioning to examine the relationship of the traveler to the specific places in which the subject resides. More than any other location, Africa serves as the chief terrain for the Black mobile subject unto which complex questions of identity, heritage, national selfhood, and history are examined. I began to bring the two major foci of this study together—the genre of travel writing and the phenomenon of Black diasporic engagement with Africa—by scrutinizing the works of twentieth-century travelers about Africa. The analyses that follow delve even deeper into the forms and functions of travel to and writing about Africa. The goal is to show the variety of Black travel writings about Africa and underscore their similarities as well as differences.

This chapter is divided into four parts, each of which offers a close reading of two travel narratives with the focus on a particular theme that appears prominently in the texts. These themes include: 1) the search for roots in Africa and the discursive construction of connections to the continent on the level of the travel narrative; 2) the disenchantment of the idea of diasporic return and the traveler-writers' deconstruction of Africa as a mythical place for Black Americans; 3) the search for home and for a Promised Land in Africa and other places where Black communities reside; and 4) the critical engagement with and retracing of the history of the Black diaspora and the cultural memory of slavery and the slave trade. Accordingly, the arrangement of the travel narratives and chapters does not follow a chronological order but a thematic one. This structure reflects certain findings: For one, while some travel narratives

foreground certain topics and perspectives more than others, all of the works address the abovementioned themes but approach them differently. In regard to particular concerns and ideologies, there is no explicit development that unfolds chronologically, although it can be noted that more recent narratives tend to engage with the genre in a more critical and self-reflexive manner. Travel narratives such as those written by Caryl Phillips and Saidiya Hartman reflect on the genre's problematic nature and probe the boundaries of travel writing as they depart from the conventionalized modes of narration.

1. (Re)Writing Roots

The significance of Alex Haley's Pulitzer-winning classic *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* for Africa-bound Black travelers and travel writers becomes apparent when considering that *Roots* is among the most prominent and frequently employed intertexts, a fact that also testifies to its enormous transnational influence. *Roots* filled in the contours of Black diasporic longing for an identifiable link to an African past and demonstrated the possibility of return and thus a symbolic reversal of the Middle Passage. In *Roots*, Haley discursively creates a connection between his own life and an African past, thereby countering slavery's gruesome destruction of narratives of origin and belonging. Retracing his family history back to Africa by means of a symbolic journey into the past and an actual journey to Gambia, he reconstructs an essential racial identity. His visit to the remote village of Juffure where he encounters a griot, a storyteller who preserves and passes down the local community's history through the oral tradition, is presented as the culmination of his journey. In *Rites of Return: Diaspora and the Politics of Memory* (2011), Marianne Hirsch and Nancy K. Miller describe the *Roots* script that influences many return narratives as follows:

> As a quest narrative, it exposes its research methods: travel to the village of Juffure in Gambia where Haley believed his slave ancestor Kunta Kinte was born, the collection of oral accounts of the capture and enslavement of his forebear, and the consultation of the manifest of *The Lord Ligoner*, the slave ship on which Kunta Kinte was thought to have crossed the seas to the United States. Using this evidence to construct a history of Kunta Kinte's representative life story, Haley set the stage for the performance of roots seeking and the climactic moments of recovery that have become common features of American collective self-fashioning. (1-2)

The two travel narratives on which this chapter focuses—Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (1995) and Isaiah Washington's *A Man from Another Land: How Finding My Roots Changed My Life* (2011)—draw on the narrative template of *Roots*, foregrounding such abovementioned climactic moments of recovery. Furthermore, both works adhere to the return-to-roots formula, which Rüdiger Kunow outlines in the context of multicultural American literature. It represents the journey, or quest for identity, of a culturally uprooted protagonist seeking to recover their roots. Constitutive elements are the relocation of an alienated member of an ethnic

group within a home space, the resolution of an identity crisis, and the provision of closure, both on the level of *histoire* and *discours* (202).

Whereas Barack Obama's family history is tied to Kenya and allows him to establish connections with his extended family, Isaiah Washington has no distant relatives that he can search for in Africa. Like many African Americans, he is unable to trace the family line back more than a few generations and fill in the blank spaces of his family's history that were created by slavery. Both texts exemplify what Hirsch and Miller assert, namely that "originary homelands are not simply there to be recovered: already multiply interconnected with other places, they are further transformed by the ravages of times, transfigured through the lenses of loss and nostalgia, constructed in the process of the search" (3). *Dreams from My Father* and *A Man from Another Land* are quest narratives that present the traveler-writer's search for roots and affiliation with the African continent. However, as I show in this chapter, these roots and affiliations are narratively constructed. The travel narratives serve to form transnational ties between the narrators' lives in the United States and a perceived origin. In other words, travel writing 'roots' the individuals to specific locations on the African continent and to an ancestral past that provides them with a renewed sense of self and a purpose in life.

1.1 Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (1995)

Barack Obama's acclaimed first book *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*, which has been praised for its elegant prose, presents a journey of self-discovery and personal development. It relates the narrator's passage from youth to adulthood, covering a time span from the 1960s to the 1980s. Obama's narrative journey begins with his upbringing in Hawaii and Indonesia, followed by his transition into adulthood, his education in Los Angeles, and his work as a community organizer in Chicago's South Side and ends with a transformative trip to Kenya where he meets the family of his deceased father. As the son of a White Kansan mother and a Black Kenyan father who is physically and emotionally absent from Obama's life, questions of identity and cultural heritage lie at the heart of his story. As Obama states in the introduction to *Dreams from My Father*, it "is a record of a personal, interior journey—a boy's search for his father, and through that search a workable meaning of his life as a black American" (*Dreams* xvi). The narrative employs the motif of the journey as a vehicle to explore the narrator's complex cultural and racial

background, linking the search for a better understanding of who he is to meditations on race and identity within a US-American national context.

Dreams from My Father has often been discussed in relation to the author's political career. Although it was first published in 1995 as an autobiography, the narrative was reframed as a presidential memoir and campaign autobiography when Obama's political ambitions became apparent (Couser 259). Literary and cultural studies scholars have also focused on reading the text within the African American literary tradition of autobiographical writing. This strand of scholarship analyzes how the narrative invokes canonical male-authored works of self-assertion and self-discovery, such as Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), and Alex Haley's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965), by working through conceptualizations of Black masculine identity, selfhood, and community (D. Stein; see also Baillie 2011). Approaching *Dreams from My Father* in this way has frequently resulted in a predominant focus on the first two parts of the book, which narrate Obama's formative years.

By contrast, my analysis reads *Dreams from My Father* as an example of Black travel writing that foregrounds a quest for roots and a return to an African homeland. In particular, the main focus will be on the last part of the narrative entitled "Kenya," which relates the narrator's journey to Africa. I argue that travel writing functions to establish ties between the narrator and his paternal homeland as the traveling subject integrates into Kenyan culture and unites with family members. The journey culminates in a deliberately constructed celebratory homecoming to Africa, an arrival that ultimately brings personal closure. The roots trip to Kenya, however, sets itself apart from many Black travel narratives that depict a traveler who is a descendant of enslaved Africans. Obama's family line does not fade into the obscurity of the slave past;[1] therefore, the narrator's journey to Africa is not a return to "a symbolic

1 Without this "baggage of slavery" (Nyong'o 4), Obama's 'Blackness,' his nationality, and ethnicity were the topics of controversial discussions and debates when his presidential aspirations were announced. Critics have claimed that he would be unable to represent the African American experience because he is not connected to the history of slavery. The history of (post)colonialism, rather than slavery, accounts for Obama's Blackness or his presence in the United States. "[T]rapped in such a tautological exclusion from African Americanness" (3), Obama has worked to situate himself within the African American context. Obama's campaign rhetoric attempted to fit his transnational and multiracial heritage into an American framework and thus "regularly elided his cosmopolitan background in order to reweave his personal story into a U.S.-specific

space in an ambiguous cultural past" (Borman 102). Rather, it involves his engagement with the contemporary condition of Kenya and with his extended family. In this regard, Obama's narrative demonstrates that "return transforms the abstract terms of belonging—such as the presence of family or a felt sense of history—into historical and intellectual understandings of the self, where Africa is seen in specific rather than general terms" (103). As a revised form of Haley's *Roots* narrative, *Dreams from My Father* constructs rather than discovers ties to Africa and discursively locates the narrator within a Kenyan context through narrative strategies that are examined in the analysis.

Structured chronologically along the pivotal stages of Obama's life and organized around locations, the main narrative is divided into three parts—"Origins," "Chicago," and "Kenya"—and enclosed by the preface to the 2004 edition, a brief introduction, and an epilogue. Obama's journey of personal development and of his search for a purposeful narrative of his life begins by situating the narrator within a multicultural and multiethnic background in the first part, "Origins." This section covers a wide-ranging terrain, both in geographical and temporal terms: it relates the narrator's early years in Hawaii with his mother and grandparents, his time spent in Indonesia with his mother and stepfather, his education in prep school in Hawaii, and his college years in Los Angeles and New York. The title "Origins" is an intertextual reference to the book *Origins* (that young Obama received from his mother), which holds "a collection of creation tales from around the world, stories of Genesis" (*Dreams* 10). Like the book that assembles stories of creation, the first section of the narrative recalls the narrator's story of becoming, his own genesis (see also Essi 265). In this part, the narrator expresses his desire for a personal narrative of origin that accounts for his complex sense of self and that explains "the mystery of [his] own life" (*Dreams* 432). Obama's experiences as a Black man raised in a White family are not accommodated within American conceptions of identity. The absence of the father who left the family to return to Kenya when Obama was a toddler and died when his son was twenty-one created a void that the narrator tries to fill. He articulates his yearning for a story of origin to explain his Blackness, noting that his mother's "account of the world, and my father's place in it, was somehow incomplete" (52). In this sense, Obama's search for the history

narrative of slavery, segregation, and civil rights" (4). Somewhat ironically, he was connected to African Americans by the discovery of his maternal lineage's historical ties to southern enslavers in 2007 (4-5).

of his lost father, who "remained a myth to [him]" for most of his early life, underscores his desire for a narrative that explains his inheritance. The absent father thus leads the narrator to craft his own story, attempting to satisfy his "longing for a place […] and a fixed definite history" (104).

The narrator's transition into adolescence is accompanied by feelings of confusion that are related to his position as a Black American. Trying "to reconcile the world as [he]'d found it with the terms of [his] birth" (*Dreams* 85), that is, to make sense of Blackness, Obama finds himself in a struggle: "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). The prefabricated concepts of Black identity do not allow for a reconciliation of his personal experiences. As the narrative suggests, Obama found "himself restricted by white America's construction of black identity" (Baillie 323).[2] The opening part of the narrative delineates the narrator's struggle to come to terms with his 'origins' and cultural heritage and the absence of the mythical father figure that he knows only through family anecdotes and a brief visit that he paid his son. The narrator confides, "I had no idea who my own self was" (*Dreams* 82) and asks, "[w]here did I belong?" (115), signaling a sense of unbelonging and confusion about his identity that accompanied him through his childhood and young adulthood. These concerns point to a key theme in the book, namely "the absence of a meaningful narrative of origin that explains the narrator's blackness and presence in a familial and cultural space that is almost completely non-black" (Essi 266). The division of the African and American self, what Du Bois conceptualized as double consciousness, stems not only from the absence of the father figure but also from the specific racial identity that uneasily fits into the hegemonic racial discourses in the United States. These questions eventually incite Obama's trip to Kenya in his search to find answers relating to his father's life and to his inheritance—that is, the Blackness and the "funny name"

2 The narrator's realization that his choices and the roles he can assume as a young Black man in the United States are limited is expressed when he writes the following: "at the time when boys aren't supposed to want to follow their fathers' tired footsteps, when the imperatives of harvest or work in the factory aren't supposed to dictate identity, […] the principle difference between me and most of the man-boys around me—the surfers, the football players, the would-be rock-and-roll guitarists—resided in the limited number of options at my disposal" (*Dreams* 79).

(*Dreams* viii), which his father had bequeathed to him. It is this inheritance, as well as his father's legacy, that requires exploration.

The narrative aims to resolve the tension that arises from the narrator's seemingly opposing cultural and racial affiliations by venturing on a quest for roots and tracing his paternal family line back to Kenya. The narrative trajectory is mirrored in the itinerary, a journey pattern that follows a course that points toward Kenya, the journey's destination both in terms of where the narrative ends and also where the narrator finds closure. The first part of *Dreams* already gestures to the pivotal journey and prepares for the last part, "Kenya," and Obama's visit to his family. As has been observed, the stories told in the first two parts of the book "consistently build toward the moment of symbolic return to Africa" (Borman 107). The significance of the visit to Kenya is anticipated when the narrator mentions in the introduction that the journey gave him a new understanding of and a new perspective on his life. From the very beginning, then, the narrative gestures to the climactic end and Obama's visit to Kenya as a constitutive moment and transformative experience, addressing the process and progress that yielded a reevaluation and reinterpretation of his earlier stories (107). The narrator states that "[i]t was only many years later, after I had sat at my father's grave and spoken to him through Africa's red soil, that I could circle back and evaluate these early stories for myself" (*Dreams* xv-xvi). On Kenyan ground, the narrator gains a new understanding of his family's history and incorporates this new knowledge into his personal story to arrive at a better understanding of who he is. From this vantage point ensues a retrospective reevaluation of his life. In this light, the narrative journey is a way of meaning-making and endowing stories with significance. Moreover, transforming the journey into a meaningful narrative through writing functions as an act of identity formation.

Similar to Obama's image of his father, the "Old Man," as he is referred to, the images of Africa that the narrator has formed over time are vague and ambiguous, comprised of the tales and anecdotes told to him by members of his maternal family. In their well-worn stories, his father is a construct, "a prop in someone else's narrative" (*Dreams* 26). The narrator recounts how he has spun a convenient story of his father that was naturally disproved when meeting him in person: "I had decided that I preferred his more distant image, an image I could alter on a whim—or ignore when convenient" (63). Even after the visit, the narrator discovers that his father "remained something unknown, something volatile and vaguely threatening" (63). Like the image of his father, Africa similarly figures as volatile and abstract in the first part

of the narrative (see also Smithers 494-95). Moreover, the narrator's image of Africa is informed by stereotypical conceptions of the continent and serves both as a source of pride and shame. Therefore, when traveling to Kenya, the images of Obama, Sr. and Africa both have to be revised, becoming more complex and complicated.

The third part, "Kenya," opens with a scene in transition, that is, with the narrator literally being in the air on the way from London to Nairobi. This opens up space for reflection and the narrator contemplates his interior confusion and his anxiety about his impending visit to Kenya. This transitory state of Obama's journey is also mirrored in his feelings of uncertain belonging, which the narrator describes when he states that he feels like "a Westerner not entirely at home in the West, an African on his way to a land full of strangers" (*Dreams* 301). The narration begins to resolve this conflict—this postcolonial condition of not belonging or identifying with one place completely—by emphasizing his ties to Africa and his distance from the Western or European context. Not only is he coming closer to his African heritage physically and geographically but also through forging a distance between himself and Europe. Notably, the narrator establishes a stark contrast between Europe and Africa, presenting Europe as a foreign and Africa as a welcoming space. Thinking back on his journey through Europe, the narrator describes himself as a lonely traveler who was "edgy, defensive, hesitant with strangers" (301), and thus underscores the disconnection he felt from the places he visited and people he encountered. He resolves, "It wasn't that Europe wasn't beautiful […]. It just wasn't mine" (301). The feelings of alienation, of being an outsider or foreigner in Europe, and the hope of finally coming to terms with his African heritage resonate in the depiction of the weather: He flies out of Heathrow airport "under stormy skies" (299) to arrive in Nairobi at "an African dawn" with "high thin clouds streak[ing] the sky, their underbellies glowing with a reddish hue" (304). The way his first impression of Kenya is narrated already anticipates a positive, promising experience and reinforces an underlying sense of hope: The dawn represents the promise of a new day and signifies the imminence of a new beginning; this underlines the contrast between Heathrow's stormy skies, resonating with hostility, and the welcoming atmosphere of Kenya.

That Obama's journey to Kenya will turn into a homecoming is suggested several times throughout the first two parts of the narrative. For instance, when his Kenyan half-sister Auma visits him in Chicago, she urges the narrator to travel to Kenya by saying, "We need to go home" (*Dreams* 222). Her state-

ment implies that for Obama, Kenya is home. Furthermore, when a friend comments on the narrator's pending journey to Kenya, assuring him that "[i]t'll be just like *Roots* […]. A pilgrimage" (302), the intertextual reference to Haley's paradigmatic story of return raises certain expectations: Obama, it can be assumed, will also be able to reconnect with his African roots and recover a personal narrative of origin. While the sojourn promises to be successful—after all, he has direct ties to Kenya—the narrative time and again suggests a more complicated story. In fact, a more hesitant stance is put forth by the narrator to signal his awareness of the possible pitfalls such a return might entail. The reference to *Roots* is immediately contrasted with a reflection on African Americans' idyllic vision of the continent as a potential homeland. The narrator discloses his ambiguous feeling toward Kenya, and Africa at large, when he states the following: "Africa had become an idea more than an actual place, a new promised land, full of ancient traditions and sweeping vistas, noble struggles and talking drums" (302). Here, the narrator reflects his awareness of the romanticized vision of Africa in the Black imagination. He aligns himself with other diasporic subjects gazing toward Africa to find meaning while simultaneously criticizing the selective and often superficial embrace of those aspects and facets of the continent that can be easily claimed: "With the benefit of distance, we engaged Africa in a selective embrace—the same sort of embrace I'd once offered the Old Man. What would happen once I relinquished that distance?" (302). The use of the first-person plural explicitly links the narrator to other diasporic travelers and with this, to the idea of return to an African homeland—a belief made possible only from a distant position that is ignorant to the lived realities of the continent. The reflective commentary on idealized visions of the continent signals that he recognizes them as potentially misleading. These reflections are placed in the text to underline the assumption that Obama's return, his homecoming, is not an easy task to achieve.

In a similar vein, his arrival does not immediately lead to a euphoric homecoming celebration because he is left waiting at the baggage claim at the airport and his excitement is overturned by the feeling of abandonment: "The rush of anticipation had drained away, and I smiled with the memory of the homecoming I had once imagined for myself, clouds lifting, old demons fleeing, the earth trembling as ancestors rose up in celebration. Instead I felt tired and abandoned" (*Dreams* 304-05). Rather than evoking romanticized visions of a return, the narrative gestures to a more complicated quest. Obama's 'return' to his paternal homeland, the narrative suggests, is a realistic home-

coming that requires from the narrator an engagement with the place. The narrator thereby separates himself from those diasporic tourists who come to Africa carrying the vision of a mythical place; these images often diverge from reality, creating notions of alienation and disappointment. In a similar fashion, the narrative raises doubts regarding the possibility of mending the divided part of his self and finding easy answers to complex questions of identity and belonging: "I'd come to Kenya thinking that I could somehow force my many worlds into a single harmonious whole. Instead, the divisions seemed only to have become more multiplied" (347). The insertion of such self-reflexive commentary functions to underscore the narrator's seemingly reasonable expectations, which defy the easy trajectories of the homecoming narrative. However, the frequently voiced skepticism about the success of his return fades into the background the longer he stays in Kenya. Increasingly, his closeness to Kenya is foregrounded by his growing ties to his Kenyan family and his becoming familiar with the place, the people, and Luo culture. Doubts regarding the success of his Kenyan journey are eventually cast aside and there is a steady progression toward narrative closure and a complete sense of self.

Beginning with the flight to Kenya, the narrator foregrounds his growing connection with his ancestral homeland. In comparison to Obama's stay in Europe, where he felt profoundly alienated, his arrival scene in Nairobi is interspersed with images of homecoming and family reunion that evoke notions of familiarity and belonging. *Dreams from My Father* hence alters the conventional portrayals of the traveling subject who arrives in the location of the visit, a foreign country, to be greeted by a culture markedly different from their own that we often find in travel narratives. Instead of recounting entering Africa as crossing the threshold into a different or foreign world with attendant notions of bewilderment, wonder, or confusion, the narrator's arrival reflects a homecoming. His relatives embrace him as the long-lost family member who has finally found his way home. He is greeted by their exclamations: "Welcome home" (*Dreams* 303), "My son has come home" (316), and "you have finally come home" (374). The familiarity he experiences signifies the beginning of a process of integrating into Kenya. Importantly, the narrator presents himself not as the tourist he was in Europe but as a returnee. To further emphasize the connection that the narrator already experiences in the very first moments in Kenya, a scene is presented in which he highlights how his name is recognized; he is identified as the son of Dr. Obama: "For the first time in my life, I felt the comfort, the firmness of identity that a name

might provide […]. No one here in Kenya would ask how to spell my name, or mangle it with an unfamiliar tongue. My name belonged and so I belonged" (305). Contrary to the many instances in which his name has led to confusion and discrimination, in Kenya he is no longer just "a black man with a funny name" (viii) but instantly perceived as being of this place. The incident evokes a sense of belonging and establishes Obama's link to Kenya and locates the narrator in a particular place, culture, and family.

The narrative positions Obama simultaneously as a postcolonial subject, privileged Western traveler, and cultural insider. An elderly woman at the marketplace in Nairobi recognizes Obama as American and insists that he does not "look much like a Luo" (*Dreams* 310), disregarding his playful protest that he is indeed Luo. However, shortly after the encounter, he is mistaken for an unprofitable Kenyan customer at a restaurant. Whereas White tourists instantly receive attention and service, Obama and his sister are ignored by the waiters. The incident serves to create a connection between the narrator and other Kenyans, while simultaneously disassociating him from the tourists whom he observes in Nairobi and whose presence the narrator describes as "an encroachment" (312). He contends that "they were expressing a freedom that neither Auma nor I could ever experience, a bedrock confidence in their own parochialism, a confidence reserved for those born in imperial cultures" (312). Ignoring his own American background and privileged upbringing, he distances himself from these tourists; his criticism signals a growing familiarity with and immersion into Kenyan life. Moreover, by foregrounding the moments of inclusion and exclusion like those sketched above, the narrative thematizes the politics of belonging, which encompasses complex questions of identity, attachment, and location for Black diasporic travelers such as Obama.

Over the course of his time spent in Kenya, the narrator gradually draws nearer to the final destination, physically and symbolically, and embarks on another journey, where his search as well as his narrative come to an end. Together with his Kenyan relatives, Obama travels from Nairobi via train and bus to Alego, a remote village in the countryside where "Granny," the stepmother of Obama's father, resides on the family's rural homestead, the ancestral home and final resting place of his father and grandfather. The place is referred to as "Home Squared," denoting, as Auma explains, that in contrast to an urban residency in Nairobi where Kenyans live and work, the house or hut in the country is considered the "true home," the place "where your people come from" (*Dreams* 369). By traveling to "Home Squared"—or, in Obama's case, "Home

Cubed," as suggested by his half-brother because he lives in the United States and not in Nairobi (369)—the narrator takes part in a ritualized component of Kenyan life, a journey from the *house* in the city to the *home* in the country. The journey to "Home Squared" is portrayed as his return to the ancestral home and the point of origin. Notions of home and belonging that are connected to his trip to Alego are underscored as the narrator is warmly received by Granny, who welcomes him home and draws him into a tight hug before leading him into the house. Granny's house resembles a material archive of historical family documents. It is stocked with "various family artifacts" (374) including Obama, Sr.'s Harvard diploma and yellowing photographs of him and other family members. Finally, the character of Granny offers the long-sought-after narrative of his paternal lineage that provides Obama with an understanding of his own history and story of origin. Earlier in the text, he already gestured to this recovery of a story when he quietly muses, "If I could just piece together his story, […] then perhaps everything else might fall into place" (372). In "Home Squared," then, he feels that "a circle was beginning to close, so that I might finally recognize myself as I was, here, now, in one place" (377). In this significant place, Obama finally receives the story that he has been looking for, which enables him to make sense of his Blackness and his feelings of confusion and alienation.

The narrative conjures a pastoral setting when describing the family gathering outside the house in the grass yard and under the shade of a mango tree, where the women braid their hair. It thus establishes an appropriate background for the scene in which Obama becomes symbolically connected to the place by way of the story of his forbearers. The passage announcing the paternal mythology, which is recounted by his grandmother, is characteristically poetic and merits attention:

> I asked Granny to start from the beginning. How did our great-grandfather Obama come to live in Kendu? Where did our grandfather work? Why did the Old Man's mother leave? As she started to answer, I felt the wind lift, then die. A row of high clouds crossed over the hills. And under the fanning shade of the mango tree, as hands wove black curls into even rows, I heard all our voices begin to run together, the sound of three generations tumbling over each other like the currents of a slow-moving stream, my questions like rocks roiling the water, the breaks in memory separating the currents, but always the voices returning to that single course, a single story… (*Dreams* 394)

Notably, the language barrier that circumscribes direct communication between the narrator and Granny, who speaks Luo, is torn down. While the preceding sentences and Obama's questions required a translation by Auma, whose character functions as a translator and cultural mediator throughout Obama's visit, the narrator now addresses Granny directly. This transgression of the language barrier symbolizes the narrator's growing familial and cultural intimacy. Moreover, it formally serves to create narrative cohesion by erasing the breaks and intermissions of a realistic depiction that would make the account that follows fragmentary (Shima 17; Essi 275). Furthermore, the cohesion and coherence of the 'single story' that Obama eagerly awaits are underscored by the imagery of the women braiding hair, which signifies an interweaving of narrative strands that combine to create the familial fabric that becomes Obama's inheritance. In a similar fashion, the evocation of images of water, streams, and currents speaks to the idea of the river as a symbol of African heritage as well as of a transatlantic link between Africa and the United States.[3] Based on this assumption, one can expect that Granny's story provides the connection between the narrator's formerly disparate worlds—his lives in the United States and Kenya. The above-cited passage is therefore indicative of the way that Obama's life story will ultimately be transformed into an ostensibly conclusive narrative that overrides the complexities and confusions that are tied to his sense of self as a Black man.

This story of the narrator's paternal forbearers is mediated in the form of a monologue, an oral testimony by Granny who takes over the narration for the next thirty pages. The ellipsis at the end of the passage marks a direct transition from Obama's narration into Granny's story. Granny's account begins with a delineation of the Obama family's ancestral lines of descent that has an almost biblical quality: "First there was Miwiru. It's not known who came before. Miwiru sired Sigoma, Sigoma sired Owiny, Owiny sired Kisodhi, Kisodhi sired Ogelo, Ogelo sired Otondi, Otondi sired Obongo, Obongo sired Okoth, and Okoth sired Opiyo" (*Dreams* 394). The narrative is rendered in "a

3 Analyzing images of water in the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance, Maren E. Loveland notes that "[t]he rekindling of connection between a common African ancestry, the pastoral ideal, and the modern African American through water is a common motif in the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance, a notion revealed in the exploration of the image of the river as a symbol of African heritage." She further remarks that the poet Langston Hughes "heavily emphasizes the significance of rivers in providing the poetic transatlantic connection between Africa and the United States in his deliberate use of this heavily signified image" (65).

creation myth tone" (Shima 17) that is strikingly reminiscent of the encyclopedic, multigenerational saga of Alex Haley's forebearers revealed to him by a village griot in *Roots*. Haley describes the encounter with the griot as follows:

> Spilling from the *griot*'s head came an incredibly complex Kinte clan lineage that reached back across many generations: who married whom; who had what children; what children then married whom; then their offspring. […] I was struck not only by the profusion of details, but also by the narrative's biblical style, something like: '—and so-and-so took as a wife so-and-so, and begat … and begat … and begat…' (*Roots* 678)

Similar to how Haley learns about the origin of the Kinte clan, Obama is finally rewarded with the ancestral history of his paternal family, which fills the voids in his own life story. While Haley does not recount the exact story told to him by the griot, *Dreams from My Father* embeds Granny's story in the text. This story, however, is one of disappointed hopes and unrealized dreams, of estrangement, abandonment, self-destruction, and patriarchal domination that is quite different from the glorious family saga depicted in *Roots*. Obama learns about his father and grandfather and their attempts to reinvent themselves independently and lead lives that were purposely different from their fathers. He also learns about their dismissal of family expectations, his father's inability to provide for his family, and the silences that destroyed the ties between father and son. Contrary to how Obama imagined his grandfather, he was not an anti-colonialist but a servant for a colonial family. Along similar lines, the stories he heard about his father contrast with the anecdotes told by members of his maternal family, in which he was portrayed as charming, confident, and intelligent. Importantly though, the mystery that has surrounded Obama, Sr. and that propelled Obama's journey to Kenya and the search for his African heritage is finally resolved. As the narrator navigates his disappointment and forgiveness, the reconciliation with the past allows him to look forward. In this regard, discovering his father's life story is a way to discover himself.

The importance of Granny's account is visually marked by indentation. The omission of quotations marks and direct speech function to create a seamless narrative. Several scholars have commented on the distinct form in which this section of the book is rendered (for example, Shima 16-18; Essi 274-75). According to Thomas Couser, the seamless linear narrative is implausibly conveyed in the form of a long speech: "a single-sourced story is inserted whole into the larger narrative as if simultaneously heard, memorised, and

accepted as authoritative" (265). The narrative's departure from strictly realist depictions and the omission of disruptions and repetitions, which must undoubtedly have occurred, highlight how the narrative creates cohesion and coherence. It also signposts the climactic moment of reconciliation and closure found by the narrator at the end of the book.

The story of his family, or more precisely that of his paternal forebearers as told to him by Granny, is essential to Obama's own narrative, biography, and identity.[4] Drawing on what he has heard, the narrator appropriates the story and brings it to life by conjuring mental images of his father and grandfather that pass before his mind's eye: "I see my grandfather [...]", "The picture fades, replaced by the image of a nine-year-old boy—my father" (*Dreams* 427-28). As he projects his own emotions and experiences onto his male ancestors, he is able to arrive at a better understanding of their lives. Accordingly, by incorporating the story of his forbearers into the narrative, the narrator adopts his paternal legacy and makes it part of his own life story. In doing so, he underlines his claim to Kenyan roots. Taking into account that references to his mother and White maternal family are absent from the Kenya section, the new narrative of his Kenyan ancestors appears to replace the initial origin story, namely, Obama's upbringing in a multicultural and multiethnic context, which is presented in the first section "Origins." Equipped with new knowledge about his Kenyan legacy, the narrator is now able to piece together the story of his father, and with it make sense of his own. What follows is not only a symbolic reconnection and reconciliation with his father, whom he addresses directly—crying out, "Oh, Father" (429)—but also a cathartic experience at the gravesites of his father and grandfather that represents the narrative's epiphany:

> For a long time I sat between the two graves and wept. When my tears were finally spent, I felt a calmness wash over me. *I felt the circle finally close*. I realized that who I was, what I cared about, was no longer just a matter of intellect or obligation, no longer a construct of words. I saw my life in America—the black life, the white life, the sense of abandonment I'd felt as a boy,

4 Granny's story—Obama's immaterial inheritance—is supplemented with several documents he receives, that is, a collection of Obama Sr.'s letters as well as an entry in the book *Domestic Servant's Pocket Register*, which is reproduced in the text, that declares Obama's grandfather's status as a colonial servant. These documents serve as testaments to the existence and the lives of Obama's paternal forebears and represent a material inheritance.

> the frustration and hope I'd witness 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. The pain I felt was my father's pain. My questions were my brothers' questions. Their struggle, my birthright. (429-30; emphasis added)

With this revelation, Obama's return-to-roots story comes to a triumphal, albeit dramatically constructed end. Through the narrative act of weaving together loose ends into a 'single story,' the complexity of his multiracial heritage, a focal point of the first part of *Dreams from My Father,* is obliterated in the Kenya section. Intriguingly, it is on "Africa's red soil" (xv)—far away from the United States, where limiting racial categories, marginalization, and discrimination govern the everyday life of people of color and have complicated the narrator's sense of self—where the narrator can finally connect the parts of his life that have seemed incompatible, namely, "the black life [and] the white life" (430). He does so by relocating his own story within the history of his Kenyan family. The climactic and transformative moment is reflected by the change of weather that Granny had foreseen prior to her retelling of the ancestral history. Obama's anxiety is released and calmness washes over him as "[a] light rain [begins] to fall" (430), evoking notions of a new beginning and a rebirth. This closing scene suggests that Obama returns strengthened from the experience and is now prepared to begin a new chapter of his life in the United States.

The above scene acts as the preliminary end of the book and is only followed by a brief epilogue. By ending the main narrative in Kenya and at this particular moment of epiphany, the topics that would have to be addressed if the narrative continued to relate Obama's journey back to the United States would arguably have disrupted this narrative coherence. However, the closure that is achieved at the end leaves several questions unanswered. For example, upon his return to the United States, how do racial tensions affect his newfound sense of self? While effortlessly merging the different parts of his identity in Kenya, would he have to "slip back and forth between [his] black and white worlds" (*Dreams* 82) once he left? How would the relationship to his Kenyan relatives evolve, who see in him the lost son returned as well as "an American businessman" with his "hand poised on the spigot, ready to rain down like manna the largesse of the Western world" (330)? How would he attend to the responsibility that comes with him being embraced by his Kenyan relatives? Leaving such issues unaddressed, the epilogue summarizes and

quickly wraps up the last two weeks he spent in Kenya (see also Essi 277n12). The narrative then jumps ahead to his wedding, which took place several years after his trip. Recounting the wedding ceremony, the narrative focuses on the reunion with members of his Kenyan family. It presents harmonious images of families coming together and of the formation of a multiracial community. The narrator's proclamation that he "felt like the luckiest man alive" (442) concludes the book and underscores closure both on the thematic and formal level.

1.2 Isaiah Washington's *A Man from Another Land: How Finding My Roots Changed My Life* (2011)

> [T]his 250-year process of systematic dehumanization continues to have an impact upon a significant sector of African Americans today, crippling our ability to know ourselves and understand our past, to defer gratification, to believe in the future as an extension of a noble and admirable collective past of which most of us remain painfully unaware.
>
> —*Henry Louis Gates, Jr., In Search of Our Roots: How 19 Extraordinary African Americans Reclaimed Their Past*

Isaiah Washington's *A Man from Another Land: How Finding My Roots Changed My Life*[5] presents a back-to-the-roots story that also draws on the classic narrative trajectory presented in Haley's *Roots*. An American philanthropist, film producer, and actor, Washington is among "the most publicized roots-seekers of recent years," as Bayo Holsey notes (156). After Washington took a DNA test that revealed his connection to Sierra Leone and Angola, he sought to explore his roots and strengthen his ties to Africa by journeying to Sierra Leone. He recorded his experiences not only in his travel narrative but also in a documentary film, *Isaiah Washington's Passport to Sierra Leone*, released in 2010.

A Man from Another Land incisively illustrates the persistent desire of many African-descended people to reclaim ancestral connections to the continent. The media, tourist industry, and celebrities such as Haley and Washington himself also sustain the notion of Africa as the homeland. Moreover, cultural narratives have popularized Africa as a destination for Black diasporic tourists

5 It should be noted that Washington is not the sole author of *A Man from Another Land*. As indicated in the book, he wrote his narrative with the support of Lavaille Lavette.

and emigrants. African Americans' wish to trace ancestral origins remains unbroken in the twenty-first century and is encouraged by television shows and supported by DNA technology and inquiries into genealogical records. Genealogy documentary series emerged as a transnational phenomenon in the early 2000s and have spurred people's interest in their personal histories. Examples of the televised roots quests include the PBS's television series hosted by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., including *African American Lives* (2006-2008) and *Finding Your Roots* (2012-2017), which featured research into the ancestral lineages of its African American guests. Among said guests were talk show host Oprah Winfrey, former astronaut Mae Jemison, comedian Chris Rock, and writer Maya Angelou. For the guests, as well as for the viewers, such shows often yield surprising information on previously unknown ancestors. *A Man from Another Land* follows the standard format of televised roots quests. In the shows, the quest is typically structured in three main parts, or acts, as Jackie Hogan observes in her study on the subject: the hook, that is "the mystery, existential question, or dilemma at the heart of the guest's roots quest;" the (physical) journey and the "search for genealogical evidence;" and the homecoming, which entails the individual's reflection on what has been learned from the quest (102). Many shows present DNA analysis as the doorway to a history that would otherwise remain obscure. Moreover, characteristic of the media depictions of Black diasporic return is "[t]he language of homecoming, and the idea it captures of Haley representing the return of his enslaved ancestor" (Holsey 151). This idea of a return to an imagined place of origin is frequently cast as a reversal of the atrocious journey of the Middle Passage and implies a triumph over the historical subjugation by Western traders and enslavers.

In the 2009 companion volume to the PBS documentary *African American Lives*, titled *In Search of Our Roots: How 19 Extraordinary African Americans Reclaimed Their Past*, Gates articulates the belief that DNA presents "a key to unlocking our African past." He declares, "For the first time since the seventeenth century, we are able, symbolically at least, to reverse the Middle Passage. Our ancestors brought something with them that not even the slave trade could take away: their own distinctive strands of DNA" (10). His statement implies the importance of roots and rootedness to a particular place for the identification of the Black diaspora. Gates further posits that "an exact match between an American's DNA and an African's DNA reveals a shared ancestor, and possibly a shared ethnic identity, that has been lost for centuries" (10). His contestation disregards the transnational routes of the diaspora and illuminates

a preference for singular racial or ethnic identity over more fluid forms of identity and self-understanding. Moreover, he proposes that a shared racial identity may be the key to transnational understanding between Africans and the diaspora. Such rhetoric also points to the idea of return as a means of reconciliation and healing, achieved by journeying to Africa. But while DNA ancestry testing may appear dubious, it certainly holds an appeal for root seekers. The interest in it highlights the desire of people to create tangible ties to a particular place in Africa and thereby heal the emotional wounds caused by the rupture in personal and family histories. However, in *The Social Life of DNA: Race, Reparations, and Reconciliation After the Genome* (2016), Alondra Nelson remarks that "commercially available genetic tests that claim to specify genealogy, ancestral affiliation, or racial and ethnic identity are among the most conspicuous signposts of our genome age;" she thus warns against an uncritical belief in "DNA as a master key that unlocks many secrets" (7-8).

A Man from Another Land subscribes to the belief in a reconciliatory return and a reversal of the Middle Passage. Washington's travel narrative is a heroic story of a homecoming to Africa that presents itself as a twenty-first-century *Roots* story. In contrast to Obama, Washington has no familial ties to Africa that he can follow. Like many other African Americans, Washington is unable to trace his ancestral origins back for more than a few generations. With no distant relative to tell him his family's story, he uses the results of genetic testing to establish a link between his own life and Africa. Considering that Washington has no immediate personal connections to Africa or familial ties that he can search for, one may ask which roots he traces and claims. The analysis of his travel narrative explores this question. I posit that Washington selectively claims his ancestry and uses his story, which he presents as exceptional and singular, to affirm his connection to Africa. Although he voices his initial skepticism regarding genetic genealogy testing, he eventually embraces the opportunity that it promises. Thus, after receiving the lab results of a DNA test that confirm his connection to the ancestral homeland and specific African ethnic groups, he travels to the continent to further strengthen his ties. As I will delineate in the following, the narrative is an argument that supports his lifelong belief in his unique inheritance bequeathed to him by great Black men, and that demonstrates his profound engagement with Africa

through his philanthropical work, which he undertakes as a great personal devotion.[6]

In contrast to Haley, Washington's journey does not begin "in the dusty archives in which Haley researched his genealogy but rather, as befits the new millennium, with lab results" (Holsey 156). Washington receiving his test result thus figures as one of the many epiphanic moments in the narrative. Nelson examines the televised genealogy shows that have captivated viewers from the early 2000s onwards. She contends that the revealing of genetic test results to the individual and the root seeker's reaction to it has developed into a standard element of such shows. She explains that "the apex of the roots journey is 'the reveal,' a familiar concept in reality television. In this case, new or surprising information, often based upon genetic test results, is presented to a subject who expresses astonishment or elation or both, before an audience" (*Social* 95). Washington's narrative incorporates such a reveal scene and uses it to mark a turning point in the narrator's life. This first climactic moment presents the start of a personal journey that is then followed by his actual trip to Africa. The roots revelation is ceremoniously staged at the 2005 Pan African Film Festival where Washington is presented with an award. Evoking a solemn atmosphere that befits the emotional impact the revelation has on Washington's life, the narrative relates this important moment like this:

> The room […] seemed to go still. It felt like no one was breathing as Dr. Kittles started to speak. My ears were ringing loudly with anticipation and my heart pounded hard in my chest. […] I began to feel dizzy, and my legs felt weak; still, I refused to succumb. I felt transformed and complete at that moment. […] I heard him say, 'Isaiah, your results show that you share ancestry with the Mende and Temne peoples of Sierra Leone.' […] I felt reborn that night. (*A Man* 72-73)

The passage creates suspension by closely following the narrator's thoughts and emotions during the reveal and underscores Washington's profound sense of transformation and completion. The reveal is represented as a

6 While it is not the focus of this analysis, it should be noted that the narrative also represents the writer's attempt to rehabilitate his career. Washington fell from grace in Hollywood after he made an offensive remark on the set of a television show. To atone for his mistake, he represents himself in the narrative as the remorseful penitent who dutifully goes to therapy and tries to live up to his inherited greatness by doing philanthropic work in Sierra Leone.

turning point in the narrator's life because it facilitates a retrospective reevaluation and reinterpretation of his life and the experiences he had. Although the results he receives provide only an estimated proximity to a specific ethnicity—they show that he shares ancestry with the Mende and Temne people of Sierra and the Mbundu people of Angola (73)—they are without hesitation interpreted by the narrator as proof of his exceptional and unique fate. Genetic testing provides an estimation of shared ancestry, revealing matrilineage and patrilineal lines. However, it does not provide a direct connection to people or any immediate line of descent. As Nelson remarks, "ethnic lineage analysis does not associate a roots seeker with specific persons at precise spatiotemporal locations" and due to "technical limitations and historical dynamics, the associations inferred through the use of genetic genealogy are necessary provisional" ("Factness" 31). As Washington's adoption and approximation to Sierra Leone unveils, the connection that is established is narratively constructed, not given.

For Washington, the test results finally explain the "intense feeling of connectedness" (*A Man* 73) that he felt during his first trip to Africa: While yet oblivious to his roots, he experiences a distinct connection to the place upon his arrival. He relates how he "dropped down onto one knee, feeling an uncontrollable need to kiss the ground of Mother Africa," proclaiming, "I'm home again" (61). Similar feelings of connection also overcame the narrator while he was sitting at the edge of the Kunene River in Angola, sensing a physical and emotional link to the place (61-2). Looking back at this incident from the vantage point of knowing his test results, the experience and his feelings in Africa attain an even greater significance for the narrator. He chooses to identify more closely with Sierra Leone without explaining his reasons. Immediately after he receives the results, the narrator pledges to commit to helping Sierra Leone shake off "the international capitalist system" and the "colonist constructs," resolving that this is what he is meant to do (74). His instant identification with Sierra Leone leads to a strengthened sense of self. However, there is a strong notion of arbitrariness that surrounds Washington's embrace of Sierra Leone, seeing that he clearly exercises choice in his identification with the country. No explanation is provided in his narrative why he feels a particularly strong link to Sierra Leone. However, the results offered by such genetic genealogy testing "do not and cannot establish direct lines of descent and thus in practice are necessarily flexible and 'fictive'," as Nelson stresses ("Factness" 35). Washington's narrative thus exemplifies that "root seekers also become root makers" (35). The act of creating and constructing roots discursively is

strikingly illustrated in the travel narrative. Washington embraces the results of the test uncritically and, it must be added, selectively. He interprets them as the link between his past, present, and future that is tied to Africa, particularly to Sierra Leone's fate. Throughout the narrative, then, Washington works to confirm and strengthen these roots and his connection to his 'homeland.'

Already before the reveal, Washington embraced his African heritage, which he asserted through external and material things, including his attire. However, the new information he gains makes it possible for him to transform his rather abstract and symbolic connection to Africa into what he believes to be a concrete link: "No longer did I need cowrie shells hanging from my locks, African jewelry, African dance classes, or African drumming circles. […] Africa had been inside me all along. […] She was beckoning me and guiding me my entire life through my dreams" (*A Man* 73-74). The narrator's use of the female pronoun in reference to Africa is revealing and signals his conception of the continent as his motherland. Similarly revealing is his claim that the new knowledge completes the link between him and Africa, a link that was thought to be severed by slavery. Washington's genetic links to Sierra Leone emerge as the cure for broken connections and lost roots that counter the sense of alienation that he felt his whole life. He stresses that finally he "no longer felt like an outsider in the world" (107). The DNA test results and the knowledge that he has identifiable origins grant him an overwhelming feeling of belonging and connection to Africa that explains his feelings of difference and alienation in other places. The knowledge about his genetic connection to the continent also encourages changes in self-definition. In this regard, he refers to himself not only as African American but also as DNA Sierra Leonean, American-Sierra Leonean, or Sierra Leonean (Nelson, *Social* 99). The narrative emphasizes that the test results and the revelation of his origin yield a renewed sense of self and feelings of empowerment. Washington professes, "reconnecting with my Sierra Leonean roots was my life's purpose" (*A Man* 86). The knowledge of his origin leads to his engagement with Africa and entices his journey to Sierra Leone. Crucially, this engagement with Africa is not only emotional but entails an economic investment in the country when he commits himself to aid the development of Sierra Leone. Therefore, it can be noted that the results provide him with a sense of determination and open up the path and a possibility for travel and philanthropic engagement with Sierra Leone as he establishes a foundation to finance development projects.

The results of this genetic testing are employed strategically and selectively by Washington to craft a personal story for himself and to confirm his heritage and inheritance of heroic African (American) men. They are interpreted by Washington as proof that 'DNA has memory'—a conviction that becomes a mantra for him that is uttered repeatedly throughout the narrative and used to explain the notions of familiarity and the responsibility he feels toward Sierra Leone. It is also employed to emphasize his sense of self as a man who follows in the footsteps of great Black leaders. In contrast to Obama, whose narrative works to inscribe himself within his Kenyan family and culture, Washington's narrative does not picture the narrator immersing himself into a community. Instead, as Holsey notes, "Learning about his genetic code has functioned not to integrate himself within a racial community but rather to make him distinctive" (159). This distinctiveness—the belief in his exceptional destiny—is emphasized from the beginning of Washington's story. His determination to leave beaten paths, traverse barriers, and aspire to goals that others consider unattainable is connected to the history of courageous African freedom fighters. The narrator links his ambition and his will to achieve his goals to his inheritance when he states the following:

> I know that desire stems from the fact that I share a storied history, the same DNA, with great Africans and men of incredible courage. Men like Sengbe Pieh—Joseph Cinque as he was called during his historical trial—who had the bravery to lead the *Amistad* revolt. That history, that DNA, reflects a past of great accomplishment that eventually led me to my own place in history. (*A Man* 10)

Prone to overstatement, melodramatic moments, and the use of pathos, the narrator boasts of a legacy of heroic men and suggests that he himself embodies the spirit of Sengbe Pieh. Unsurprisingly, when he familiarizes himself with the history of Sierra Leone, it is the story of Sengbe Pieh, the icon of persistence and resistance, he is most interested in. "Like me, he was a child of Sierra Leone" (75), stresses the narrator. He briefly recounts the story of the *Amistad* rebellion led by Sengbe Pieh and the successful return of the African captives to their native land. Emphasizing the legacies of a glorious African past, Washington inscribes himself in a lineage of African leaders, claiming that their greatness, determination, and ambition were bequeathed on him (85). The narrative displays an obsessive privileging of individual historical actors and stores of success, victory, and heroism. Washington's appropria-

tion of African legacies and his superficial engagement with history, however, come at the expense of more complex stories of the past.

The narrative's cursory engagement with history also comes to the fore in a scene that relates the narrator's visit to the slave fort on Bunce Island. Washington familiarizes himself with the past, learning "of slaves who willed themselves to death while on the island and others, trying to escape, who were killed by sharks in the deep waters surrounding the castle" (*A Man* 139). While standing "in the center of a corral where three hundred slaves lived chained together," Washington acknowledges his feelings of anger and disgust and admits that he "felt hurt by the humiliation [the enslaved Africans] endured" (138-39). However, rather than exploring his conflicting emotions and examining the history of slavery and its effects on himself and other contemporary lives in the diaspora, he quickly moves on from "all of the horrific statistics and facts" (139) and turns toward those stories that foreground positive versions of history. Accordingly, he stresses the sense of pride he felt and exclaims that he is "a living testament to the indomitable spirit of my great-great-great-great-great-grandmother" (139). Throughout the narrative, the past is only briefly referred to and does not play an overtly significant role. Importantly, the travel narrative reduces the complex history of the slave trade to a transatlantic narrative that celebrates the individual's return from the diaspora as the end of a negatively connoted past.

A Man from Another Land frames Washington's journey to Sierra Leone as part of a long tradition of African American engagement with the continent. The narrator locates himself in an unruly male lineage of Black intellectuals and political activists such as Du Bois, Martin Luther King, Jr., Marcus Garvey, and Malcolm X. He contends, "Like them, I wanted to reverse the effects of the Middle Passage and slavery and elevate black men back to their former place in history, as kings, treated with all the respect that position garners" (*A Man* 21). Appropriately enough, Washington begins his recollection of his 2006 trip to Sierra Leone in a chapter titled "Reversing the Middle Passage." The narrator's assertion that his journey to Sierra Leone represents a reversal of the Middle Passage reflects his belief that the return journey to Africa offers healing. Furthermore, he suggests that his presence in Africa closes a circuit, instilling a connection that was severed by slavery. Thus, Washington's journey is presented as a transformation that allows the narrator to symbolically casts off the shackles of slavery that confined his ancestors and that rendered him an outsider who felt displaced and alienated. Therefore, V. W. Smith's assertion that "Africa comes to symbolize re-affirmation for the hybridized,

American-born African searching for re-identification and definitions of self-reliance" ("African American Travel" 202) certainly pertains to Washington's narrative. It obviously adheres to the idea popularized in *Roots* that a return to Africa provides "answers to cultural gaps in knowledge" as well as "inspiration and renewal" (213).

The travel narrative strings together an array of epiphanic moments and revelations, and Washington's trip to Africa is presented as an emotionally charged undertaking. Shortly after his arrival in Sierra Leone, he learns that plans are under way to induce him as the chief of the village Ngalu. For the ceremony, Washington is dressed in custom-designed clothes, lifted up to be placed on a hammock, and carried on the shoulders of men to the beating of drums. While two hundred people gather to watch his coronation, he writes, "I felt that I was transcending time and space. […] Nothing felt adequate to describe what was happening to my heart, my soul. […] The drums and the music transformed me. My spirit was at peace. I felt as if I could do anything" (*A Man* 147). As he is inducted as chief, notions of transformation and transcendence accompany the ceremony. He receives the name Gondobay Manga II and in taking on the new name, he inherits the legacy of fearless warrior leaders. While he is crowned as chief, he also learns about the folklore tale of "'*a man from another land*' that will return to Sierra Leone to help rebuild it" (147). Unsurprisingly, Washington interprets the tale as a prophesy and fashions himself as the "man from another land" who returns to Africa, destined to participate in rebuilding the country. He understands himself as Sierra Leone's savior and his philanthropic work in the country as the fulfillment of his destiny. As Holsey notes, "Seeing himself as the embodiment of this mythical figure provides a momentous ending to the tale of personal transformation" (159).

Washington's journey is represented as affirming, reassuring, and fulfilling. From the first time Washington sets foot on African soil, the narrator highlights his strong physical and emotional connection to the continent, in particular to Sierra Leone. To underscore this intimate tie to the country and his identification with it, he employs a rhetoric of homecoming and kinship. He evokes notions of home and familial affiliation, for example, by recounting how people greet him with the words "welcome home" (*A Man* 121), by describing Sierra Leone as his "newfound homeland" (117), and by noting that a woman he meets displays an uncanny resemblance with his aunt from Houston (116). At a different point in the narrative, Washington describes a scene in which he joins people who are singing and dancing in the middle of their vil-

lage. By depicting how the people form a circle around him while singing and moving to the beat of the music, the narrative conjures an image of Washington being embraced by and integrated into a community. The collective "circling and singing" (237) is presented as a deeply emotional, spiritual, and intoxicating experience. Washington loses himself in the momentary delight of dancing: "I could feel the people around me filling me up with all that they could afford to give me… their love, their respect, their gratitude" (238). This is the kind of integration into the community that the narrator longed for. During the dance, his interpreter informs him that the dance moves he performed are "ancient *Ngoboi* moves" (238). The fact that he naturally and intuitively used dance moves that, unbeknownst to him, belong to a local folk dance, functions to highlight his cultural connection to the place and its people and his deep ties to the ancestral African homeland. Importantly, the narrative places Washington not just in a contemporary African community but also foregrounds his ancient ties to the continent.

Notably, throughout the descriptions of Washington's trip to Africa, Africanist discourse slips into the narration that mythicizes and exoticizes the continent. For example, the women he observes are depicted as "elegant, mysterious, rugged majestic, and sensuous beings" (*A Man* 63) and Africa is described as a "mysterious and ancient land" (68). Such descriptions of people and places seem to be incorporated in the narrative to underline Washington's adoration for the people, his respect for their culture, and his fascination with his newfound homeland. However, instead of highlighting the narrator's deepening connection with Africa, the descriptions have a different effect: They reveal his construction and consumption of African otherness and signify his Westernized "tourist gaze" (Urry 1990). Many of the images created in his book cater to tourist expectations and perpetuate cultural stereotypes of Africa. Moreover, the narrator reveals an appropriative and proprietorial attitude toward the people of Sierra Leone to whom he refers as "my people" (*A Man* 69) and people without a voice (166). Throughout the narrative, Washington endorses his desire to help the people of Sierra Leone by becoming their mouthpiece. He announces that he "would soon become a voice for the people of Sierra Leone… people who had no voice" (166). In a patronizing gesture, he repeatedly states that the people have no voice of their own to articulate their suffering and to arouse the concern of aid donor countries. Vowing to help Sierra Leone he tells people: "My name is Isaiah Washington and I'm here for you" (125). Moreover, when holding a speech at the NAACP convention in 2006, he asserts that "[t]he voice of

Sierra Leone was heard that day" (190). His statements reflect his underlying assumption that the people of Sierra Leone are passive and voiceless, unable to speak for themselves, and therefore dependent on his support.

Washington travels to Sierra Leone with a film crew of his own to document his experiences there. The recollection of his trip that is mediated in his narrative frequently resembles the atmosphere of a Hollywood movie starring Washington as the protagonist. He stages his journey in the documentary as well as in his text as a homecoming and presents himself as the heroic savior of helpless and voiceless people. Fittingly for an actor and producer, the travel narrative represents a series of epiphanic moments and often evokes a movie-like atmosphere. While in Sierra Leone, he tells his crew to "capture the beautiful" and insists on being filmed in shots that resemble action scenes, pushing for drama, while always being "[a]ware that [the] cameras were capturing every moment" (*A Man* 234). This feeling of shooting a movie dominates the narration and sets the pace. Throughout the trip, the narrator presents himself as the story's fearless hero. For instance, he rescues a little girl who is harassed by men (124-25, 135), he assists a surgeon in performing medical procedures on two children, and he puts out a fire in his hotel. These scenes read as if the text is straight from a movie script. Centering on such acts of heroism, the narrative expands Washington's bravery to cartoonish proportions.

The final epiphany comes at the very end of Washington's travel narrative when he is granted Sierra Leonean citizenship. The chapter is tellingly entitled "Making History" and presents "the culmination of a journey" because Washington is "the first African American man in history to achieve dual citizenship from the United States and an African country" (*A Man* 284). He proclaims, "I had realized a dream that phenomenal African American men […] had long before I was born" (284). Again, the narrative capitalizes on Washington's distinctiveness, his singularity, and his exceptional personal story. As if to verify the truthfulness of Washington's astonishing, extraordinary tale and (life) journey, several pages are inserted in the middle of the book displaying photographs of the author. They show various images of Washington; for example, as a toddler, in scene shots from movies he starred in, at an award ceremony, and at his initiation as chief in Sierra Leone. These images visually retell the story offered in his travel narrative, seemingly attempting to lend credibility to his exceptional and incredible narrative.

Washington's journey to Sierra Leone is presented as a triumphal reversal of the Middle Passage that exposes his desire to reconstruct and claim a

mythical past—something that is fiercely disputed by other Black travelers and writers. It testifies to the yearning for ancestral roots and origins that people of African descent can follow and through which they can arrive at an understanding of their relationship to Africa. As he solidifies ties to his ancestral homeland, the elusiveness and the arbitrariness in creating such connections to Africa are illuminated. In this sense, both *Dreams from My Father* and *A Man from Another Land* present a variation of the classic *Roots* script. The narrators' journeys to Africa are staged as return trips that inscribe and place the traveler-writers in an African (American) male genealogy that empowers them and offers them a sense of wholeness, purpose, and even destiny. The journeys and the narratives are geared toward epiphany and closure. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the "return-to-roots" formula, which figures an alienated and questing protagonist whose journey to the roots leads to the resolution of an identity crisis, applies to the works analyzed above. As Kunow outlines,

> This discursive construction in which dislocation is finally overcome by 're-location', […] has […] a double function. On the level of *histoire*, it solves the identity crisis of a fictional character by reinstating him/her within an ethnic home space. On the level of the *discours*, it provides closure for the national cultural geography by a moment of ultimate arrival, inside a carefully circumscribed ethnic locality. (202; see also Antz 271)

For Obama and Washington, their travel experiences to Africa represent identity constituting moments that bring closure to their quests. The flow of events in the travel narratives underscores that the narratives are geared toward unity and closure. Both works create discursive links between the narrators' lives and Africa by inscribing themselves either within a family lineage or genealogy of heroic African forebearers, thus defining personal and cultural origins.