

Obama's Mother

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The American presidential election was won by a woman: Stanley Ann Dunham. Born in 1942, she died of cancer in 1995, shortly after turning 52, and thus without having seen her visionary dream realized: the election of her son, Barack Hussein Obama, as 44th President of the United States.

The male name was imposed on her by Stanley Dunham, her father, who would have preferred a boy. As the only child of Stanley and his wife Madelyn Payne, Stanley Ann was nonconformist young girl and a solitary mother, convinced that she could raise her children in a way that would prepare them for a new world, globalized and multicultural, a world that certainly didn't exist in her daily life as a middle-class girl in an anonymous little town in Kansas. Barack – or Barry, as she called him – is her creation, the fruit of a patient, attentive and loving education that was the commitment of her life, as she saw in her two racially mixed children the reflection of a better future, one in which the warm commingling of blood pacifies the false oppositions and odious attachments, the “unreal loyalties”, as Virginia Woolf called them, that reassure us in the desperate need for social identity to which our species falls prey.

When Barack Obama was born on August 4, 1961, he was still considered in half the American states the criminal product of miscegenation, or the interbreeding of races, a heinous biological hybrid whose existence simply wasn't taken into consideration while those who committed it were punished with incarceration. Today it is a hard-to-pronounce word that was coined in the United States in 1863, with a specious Latin etymology, from *miscere* (mix) and *genus* (race), to indicate the supposed genetic difference between whites and blacks. The question of miscegenation became crucial during the Civil War and subsequent

emancipation of the slaves. It was fine to grant civil rights to non-whites, but to allow intimate relations between whites and blacks was another story. The term appeared for the first time in the title of a pamphlet published in New York, *Miscegenation: The Theory of Blending of the Races, Applied to the American White Man and Negro*, in which the anonymous author promoted the idea of racial mixing as the project of the Republican Party, which supported the abolition of slavery. By encouraging the interbreeding of whites and blacks, racial differences would be progressively attenuated until they disappeared altogether. It was soon discovered that the pamphlet had been created by the Democrats in order to frighten American citizens faced with the intolerable Republican project of encouraging racial mixing. The crime of miscegenation was definitively abolished in 1967, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled the anti-miscegenation laws to be unconstitutional in response to *Loving v. Virginia*, a case in which a racially mixed married couple was sentenced to a year in prison – with the sentence suspended for 25 years on condition that the couple leave the state of Virginia – for having been found in bed together under the same roof. The marriage certificate hanging above the nuptial bed wasn't considered valid by the police – who, armed with rifles, broke down the entry door and beat the humiliated couple – because it was obtained in another county, one in which miscegenation wasn't illegal. This occurred in 1959, and the couple had to wait eight years for the moral indecency of their ordeal and their own innocence to be recognized.

One must try to imagine that America in order to understand the courage of Stanley Ann, who was 18 years old and 4 months pregnant when she married the brilliant young Kenyan student Barack Obama Sr., the first African to be admitted to the University of Hawaii. He was 25. He'd arrived in Hawaii in 1959 thanks to a scholarship from the Kenyan government, which was also sponsored by the United States to help some of the more gifted African students get an education at an American University so they could return to their native country and become part of a new, competent, modern elite.

Stanley Ann was a shy, studious girl with dreams. She was born in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, where her father served in the military. Her parents, both Kansans, met in Wichita, the state's largest city, in 1940. His mother came from a respectable family, folks who never lost their jobs, not even during the Great Depression, and lived decently thanks to a concession on their land given to an oil company. The father came from a more problematic and economically modest family. Raised by his grandparents, he had become a particularly

rebellious and impetuous adolescent because of his mother's suicide. The tough character stayed with him forever. He was strict and sarcastic with Stanley Ann, who detached from him early on and began displaying intolerance with regard to his severe, overly rough manners, his excessive intellectual simplicity, and his sometimes obtuse, sexist way of relating with the family. Stanley Ann's childhood was full of moves: from Kansas her parents went to California, then back to Kansas, then to various places in Texas, then to Seattle, where she spent her adolescent years, and finally to Honolulu, where they decided to stay. Her father had gotten into businesses of various kinds, alternating successes and failures, to finally sell furniture in Hawaii. Her mother always worked in banking, and in Honolulu she became a branch manager. The couple didn't have much interest in religion, even if the father tried to enroll his wife Toot, as he called her, into the Unitarian Universalist congregation, a religious group that mixed the scriptures of five different religions, arguing from an economic standpoint: "It's like having five religions for the price of one!" But his wife was not persuaded, saying that religion was not like a supermarket. The numerous moves had turned Stanley Ann's parents into typical "ordinary outsiders," normal people who move for financial reasons; they feel profoundly American in their values, while not feeling rooted to any particular place. They were nevertheless a tolerant couple; the father considered himself a bohemian because he listened to jazz, wrote poetry on Sundays, and wasn't afraid to count a few Jews among his dearest friends. The racial question never came up in their lives. The lives of blacks and whites in the cities they encountered in their peregrinations were so segregated that for them, as for most Americans of that generation, it was a non-existent problem.

Stanley Ann grew up solitary, spending entire afternoons reading books borrowed from the neighborhood library. She loved foreign languages and European novels. At 12 she had her first traumatic experience of social intolerance. Having arrived in a small town in Texas, she became friends with a black girl who lived next door. Stanley Ann's parents didn't object, but her schoolmates began making fun of her. The derision increased until she was marginalized. Toot, Obama's grandmother, remembered the time when she had found the two girls lying in the yard, staring at the sky, while the neighborhood kids stood behind the fence calling them all sorts of names, insulting them. They called Stanley Ann a "nigger lover," insinuating that their friendship had sexual overtones – the only reason to be attracted to someone different, as if contact with a black person could only represent some sexual fantasy, a wild alterity and a repressed desire latent in America's 1950s WASP Puritanism.

Her parents didn't like the conformist, intolerant and violent atmosphere of Texas either, and they decided to move to Seattle, the new economic frontier of America's Far West. The city was more open and welcoming, and Stanley Ann went to high school there. Marine Box, her best friend at the time, remembers her as the brightest student, not so much for her grades, but for her ability to think on her own and not buckle under the clichés and conformism of her country. Once, she declared herself to be an atheist, for example, scandalizing her classmates.

When her parents moved to Hawaii, Stanley Ann registered at the University of Hawaii Manoa. Notwithstanding her father's severity, her relationship with Barack Obama Sr. wasn't hindered by her parents. They invited him to dinner immediately, thinking that the young man must have been lonely living so far from home. Obviously there were many *gaffes* – not surprising since they'd had such little interaction with black people. For example, her father asked him right away if he could sing or dance, and her mother said he looked so much like Harry Belafonte. But Barack Sr. didn't allow himself to be intimidated. In fact, one night at a party he sang in front of everyone, despite not having a great voice; but his self-assuredness and charisma were noticed by all. He was a man proud of his African origins, the son of a chief, who had never been subjected to the humiliations black Americans had had to deal with; he didn't feel the weight of the color of his skin in that violent, segregated America – though still naïve with regard to racial questions, an America which hadn't yet confronted the Black Panthers and other revolutionary movements that helped build the African-American identity.

Shortly after the birth of Obama Hussein, his father was accepted into the best American universities and chose to study at Harvard. Stanley Ann didn't want to follow him to Massachusetts; she was happy with her baby, fully satisfied, but she couldn't see herself as the wife of a Kenyan politician. She knew that her husband's fate was sealed, that he would return to Kenya because his success in the United States would be an example for the entire nation, which was why he was sent to study in America. They decided to separate amicably. Barack Sr. came from a polygamous culture, so she knew that his life as a husband and father would not end with her. Stanley Ann was self-confident and happy enough with her mulatto baby that she returned to Honolulu without any complexes in order to continue her studies. She managed to get a degree Mathematics and a Master in Anthropology. That same year she met another foreign student, Lolo Soetoro, a small, dark and kind Indonesian young man, and

he began coming over to Dunham's house. Toot, Stanley Ann's mother, would play chess with him every evening and kid him about his name, Lolo, which meant "crazy" in Hawaiian. But there was nothing crazy about this young man; he was extremely courteous, affectionate with little Barry, and decidedly in love with the young, extravagant and adventurous woman. He asked her to marry him and to move to Jakarta with him. Stanley Ann accepted and went with her son to Indonesia at the end of 1967, during the years of Suharto's unstoppable climb to power and the attendant purges and decline of Sukarno, the old president and founder of the state.

Stanley Ann found work at the American Embassy, where she often brought her child with her; he would spend his days in the library reading *Life* magazine. She talked to him about politics, geography, and international relations. Lolo told Barry the stories of Indonesian mythology, about the great Hanuman, the invincible monkey-god demon-slaying warrior. The Sukarno government's atheistic communism would soon be supplanted by a new religious wave under Suharto. At school, Islam was studied, since Indonesia was (and still is) the world's most populous Muslim nation. Barry was exposed to all these influences and all these cultures. He had no problems with regard to racial belonging. He had no race. Rather, he was a citizen of the world, curious like his mother, interested in differences, self-confident and completely at ease in the ordinary everyday life of the multiethnic clan that was his family. His sister Maya Kassandra Soetoro was born in 1970. He went to school, but the alarm clock rang at three in the morning, when his mother would enter the room to the music of Mahalia Jackson, or read him the biography of Malcolm X, or make him listen to the Reverend Martin Luther King. She was forcibly inculcating him with a sense of belonging to the African-American culture gaining traction in the United States, taking a political shape, with a common identity and language. Barry had to know how to be everything: American, black, white, cosmopolitan – because this was his future, the recklessly audacious and visionary dream of his mother.

When her marriage to Lolo began to waver, Barry was sent back to his grandparents in Hawaii. It was she who left Lolo because he wanted to have more children. Soon Stanley Ann and Maya would return to Honolulu, and the family was put back together, minus any husband, with two children and the Dunham grandparents. Stanley Ann's parents dedicated themselves with love to Barry, but contrary to what could be read in the newspapers, they weren't the ones to educate him; his mother looked after his education. And as soon as she

got back to Hawaii, she continued her own studies in order to work on a doctorate that she would complete in 1992, at the age of 50. Her field of research was rural Indonesian society, which gave her the opportunity to return often to Indonesia so that Maya could see her father, with whom she still had a friendly relationship. In 1977 she decided to go on a longer trip for research, but she only took Maya with her because Barry preferred to finish up high school in the United States.

Meanwhile, Stanley Ann's career developed in a new direction. She began to deal with rural development and microcredit projects aimed at Indonesian woman for various agencies and international banks. Her life, her experience as a woman and mother of two children became the ground for her intellectual growth; they allowed her to understand things she would otherwise not have been able to see about social and cultural differences, about the condition of women and ethnic minorities. Her field of experimentation was her own life; she was at once an observer and protagonist in the world that was transforming and globalizing. But her enthusiasm and career would be cut short by ovarian cancer, which eventually killed her in 1995; she was 53.

One must ask how much of this independent, authoritative and courageous woman there was in the Obamamania that gripped the whole world during the American elections. What is new is not just his dark skin, but also his profound ability to understand and reconcile oppositions in a way that only a man who has accepted the example and authority of a woman could. Obama is of a new generation because he's the son of an intellectually authoritative woman, because he was able to have a woman as an example instead of a father, because he was steeped in the feminine values of tolerance and communion. Obama is the product of this woman, and that's his greatest success. Of course, during the electoral campaign it was better to keep the memory of Stanley Ann far from the spotlight and tell the story of this black boy raised by his Kansan grandparents. But now that Obama is president, there will finally be the opportunity to honor the creator of this perfect son, the woman who brought him up and molded him into the icon of a world to come, a world she won't see.

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