

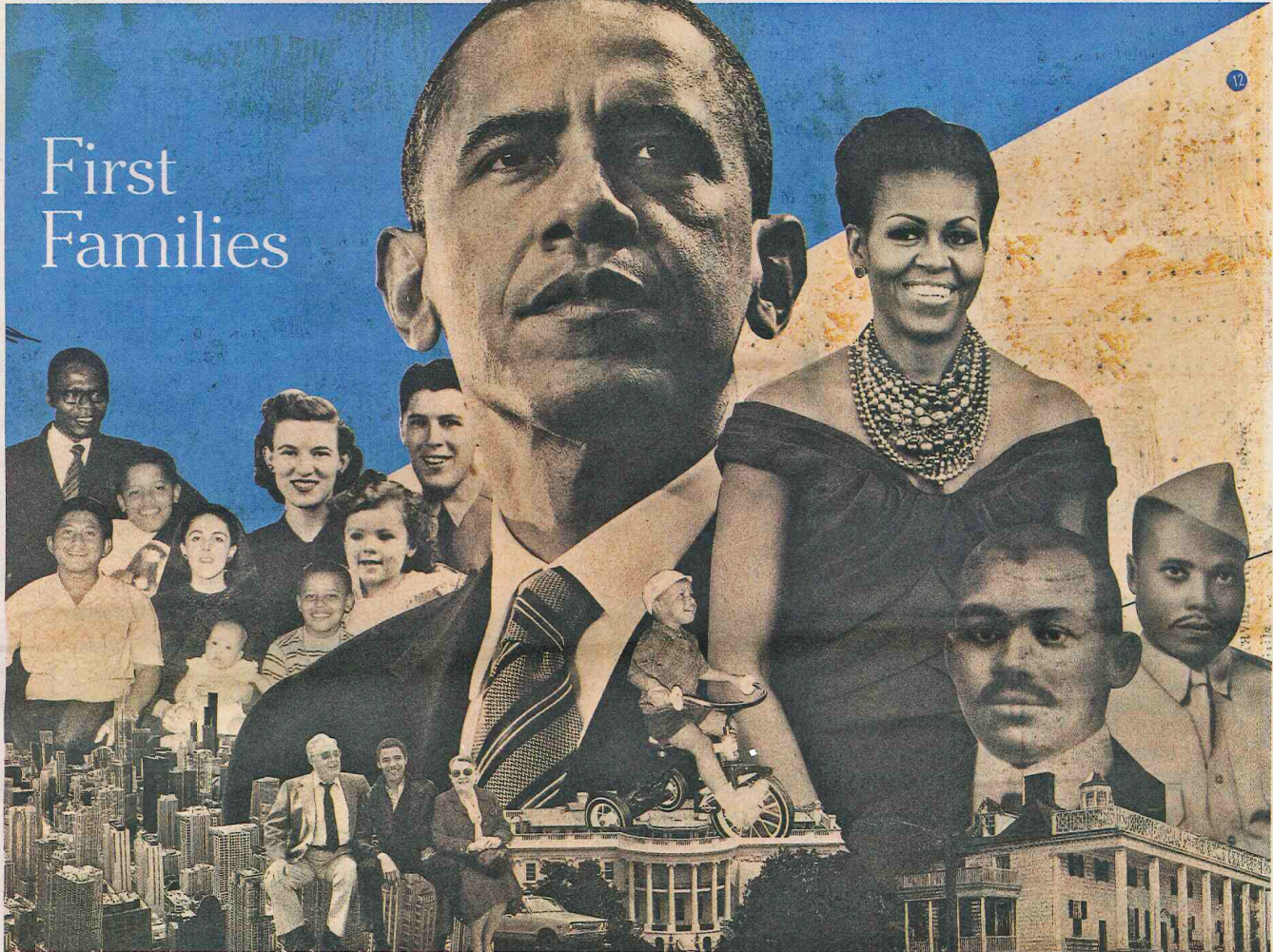
The New York Times

# Book Review

JUNE 17, 2012 \$2

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LINCOLN AGNEW

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**BARACK OBAMA**  
The Story.  
By David Maraniss.  
Illustrated. 641 pp.  
Simon & Schuster.  
\$32.50.

During his 2008 campaign, Barack Obama so often stressed the improbability of his story that we have grown inured to how unlikely it really is. Everyone knows that his name, along with his inexperience, was an electoral handicap; that his mixed-race background made his victory historic; and that his transformation within five years from local Illinois politician to the most famous person on earth (and first incumbent president since Woodrow Wilson to win the Nobel Peace Prize)

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Twelve presidents were slaveholders, and perhaps another dozen (including the two named George Bush) came from families that once upon a time owned slaves. In common with many of our most venerable institutions, the presidency has ample connection to "slavery time": the White House is like an Internet link that, if you click on it, bounces you to the lawn of a plantation.

For 42 million Americans — African-Americans — having slaves in the family tree is almost a given, but

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**AMERICAN TAPESTRY**  
The Story of the Black, White, and Multiracial Ancestors of Michelle Obama.  
By Rachel L. Swarns.  
Illustrated. 391 pp.  
Amistad/HarperCollins Publishers. \$27.99.

# 'American Tapestry'

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this fact wasn't relevant at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue until the current first family. Michelle Robinson Obama happens to descend from people once enslaved in South Carolina, Georgia, Virginia and Kentucky. She can peer at American history from that far side of the looking glass. Her husband, with no slaves in the family, may not see America in quite the same way.

After the president's term began, one expected to hear more in the press and from the Obamas about blackness, whiteness and the nation's never-ending debates about race and class. But Barack and Michelle Obama have not made theirs into a "black" White House. An exception jumped up for two nights last winter, when the commander in chief, on camera, sang the opening lines of a Robert Johnson blues standard, "Sweet Home Chicago," and Al Green's R&B ballad "Let's Stay Together" — the kind of songs that used to be called "race music."

"American Tapestry," a fascinating account of the first lady's family, corrects the omission of race from the Obama White House. No political memoir has ever looked or sounded like this one: the book spans several generations of Mrs. Obama's people and reads like a panorama of black life.

Rachel L. Swarns, a reporter for The New York Times, has uncovered the story of an ordinary black American family, typical in so many details: generations of forced work on Southern farms; sexual exploitation; children born half white; attempts to flee slavery; emancipation at the end of a rifle barrel; terrorization by the Klan during Reconstruction; futility stirred in with pleasure and church in the 1900s; a stepladder into the working class — and finally, the opportunity that allowed for Michelle Obama's superior education and unlocked 150 years of bolted doors.

The book is nonfiction, but with some 30 characters competing for space it's like a saga or perhaps a mini-series, minus the dialogue. It starts wide, intercutting the stories of four families in four Southern states during the early 1900s. Each of them deposits Northern-bound migrants, refugees from the Jim Crow South, into the growing black neighborhood of South Chicago, where, after chance meetings, dates and marriage, they produce all of Mrs. Obama's grandparents. The book then turns around and stitches together the back stories of the first lady's family lines during the 1800s, in slavery and out of it.

Some of Mrs. Obama's people lived as human property at Weymouth plantation,

*Edward Ball is the author of "Slaves in the Family" and other books. "The Inventor and the Tycoon" — his account of the partnership between Eadweard Muybridge, the motion picture pioneer and admitted killer, and Leland Stanford, the Western railroad baron — is forthcoming.*

near Georgetown, S.C., owned by Ralph Izard, from an old family of rice planters. They became sharecroppers after the Civil War. A couple on her father's side, Mary and Nelson Moten, with a young daughter named Cora, achieved that rarest of feats — they escaped slavery on the Underground Railroad. Living in Kentucky, not far from the town of Lexington, the Motens managed to make their way about 300 miles west during the Civil War and sneak across the Ohio River to Illinois. They settled in Pulaski County, north of the town of Cairo, and waited for the general emancipation.

**B**UT the hero of the book is Melvinia, Mrs. Obama's great-great-great-grandmother, who in 1852 was an enslaved 8-year-old girl living on a farm in Spartanburg, S.C., along with 20 other slaves. When her owner, David Patterson, died, Melvinia was appraised at \$475, taken from her parents and shipped to another Patterson family property, south of Atlanta. And there, seven or eight years later, the child who had been snatched from her family was raped by, or consented to sex with, her owner or one of his relatives, and gave birth to a boy named Dolphus. Swarns digs out from Mrs. Obama's background this cruel vignette, along with many others like it, and pushes them front and center. "'Mulatto' forebears pop up all across Mrs. Obama's family tree," she writes. Melvinia's life goes a long way toward explaining what Mrs. Obama means when she says, regarding her family's tendency to speak softly about the past, "A lot of times these stories get buried, because sometimes the pain of them makes it hard to want to remember."

Swarns persuaded a number of Mrs. Obama's relatives to sit for interviews, but the first lady herself did not, and she seems to have given only passive consent to the herculean investigations made on her behalf. Some of the stories here will be news, one suspects, even to members of Michelle Obama's family. There can be little doubt that she, and the president, will savor this book, but political necessity requires that she not publicly "own" her family's slave history, which conceivably could cost her husband votes in the coming election.

The book is not about the living family in the White House. It's about the dead: the field hands, housekeepers, single mothers, sharecroppers, brick workers, postmen, shoe repairmen, Pullman porters and maids — Mrs. Obama's relatives all, plain people who owned no property and left no writings. Theirs was mostly a bitter tale, full of abandonments, early death, poverty, orphans and illiteracy. Yet it is also an occasionally sweet story of church, homebuying, business-founding and weddings.

Swarns struggles to answer the question of how many of the first lady's female an-



Dolphus Shields, seated, with relatives in Birmingham, Ala., was born into slavery on a Georgia farm. He was Michelle Obama's maternal great-great-grandfather.

cestors were compelled to have sex with white men, a common occurrence in the Old South (the most famous instance being Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings), though one that black families still find it hard to talk about — and that's to say nothing of the descendants of slave owners. Swarns is at her best when airing such painful matters and the contradictory emotions they release — pity, shame, curiosity,

*Some of Swarns's stories will be news, one suspects, even to members of Michelle Obama's family.*

revulsion. She gives less attention to other signal moments of Mrs. Obama's family history, like how Melvinia was freed, at age 21, after Gen. William T. Sherman's 60,000 troops swept toward Atlanta and burned her master's town in August 1864.

The first lady has said that growing up, she talked about "almost everything" with her parents, and spent summer vacations in South Carolina within shouting distance of the plantations where some in her family may once have worked as slaves, but as for slavery, "we didn't talk about that." Swarns wrestles with this phenomenon, which might be compared to the Holocaust effect, "an almost willful, collective forgetting, an intentional loss of memory," and

finally accepts it as the necessary censorship of trauma.

A drawback of the book is that Mrs. Obama's ancestors are presented as having an obsession with uplift. They seem always to be seeking and striving. One "stepped eagerly into her new future," another is "poised to seize the widening opportunities," a third was "nurtured by a family that strived for success." Personal journeying is not what ordinary folks, swamped with work and kids and grief and laughter — and weighed down by the additional burden of racism — have tended to do. Striving is a sentiment we like to project back onto the dead.

Another problem is the heavy use of plot points that "probably" happened. In the absence of letters and written remembrance, Swarns relies too much on the conditional mood. Characters "would have," "could have" and "may have" done things, until speculation becomes a stylistic tic.

But the narrative line of "American Tapestry" is extraordinary because, at least some of the time, we see the first lady as indisputably "black." No decorous White House hostess — from Mamie Eisenhower to Jackie Kennedy to Barbara or Laura Bush — has anything to compare with Mrs. Obama's sturdy timber of a family story. Few important women come from such raw places. The book makes you remember why the Obamas, four years ago, seemed so new, so implausible. □