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Abdul-Rasheed Na'Allah (Editor). *Obama-Mentum: An Anthology of Transformational Poetry*. Publisher: Kraft Books. October 9, 2016. 144 pp. ISBN 978- 978-9789183616. Soft Cover Price: \$14.

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It was on November 4th, 2008 that President Barack Hussein Obama was elected president of the United States. On the day of his inauguration (January 19th, 2009), media outlets large and small revealed that thousands of citizens, people of color in particular, had made the pilgrimage to witness this monumental event. I was not able to travel to Washington myself; however like so many others, I did witness this historical event through watching it on television. What struck me most about the images of the audience was the presence of so many tears that pulsed from the eyes of the hopeful. What was most powerful was the possibly contained in these tears was the quietude of reflective pain due to trauma compounded by so many years of collective disenfranchisement and structural discrimination, in addition to the manner in which dim politics and a chasmic racial divide prevented us from feeling anything 'united' about the USA. The swearing in of the country's first black president carried deep meaning for a people, and a country at large, that substantive and actual transformation regarding the undergirding social and political fabric of the nation was under way. Eight years later, Obama would be both lauded for his successes in spite of a Congress with a significant conservative influence, and simultaneously critiqued for his international and domestic policies that seemed a bit too center-of-left for the deep changes many felt this country truly needed.

In 2016, Abdul-Rasheed Na'Allah, a Nigerian public intellectual, compiled an anthology of poetry written for the purpose of commemorating the inauguration of President Barack Obama. Thus, the entirety of the collection centers upon the day that marked the beginning of an eight-year journey of which meant much to so many peoples beyond the U.S. Like some flower bud that has yet to be fully revealed, Abdul-Rasheed himself recognizes the utter possibility and lack of surety regarding Obama's inauguration. In his contribution to the anthology, entitled 'This bambou drum!', he says of this "new dawn" that:

*"the stars are competing
In showering our earth with light
The moon is brighter tonight.
How well will the sun shine tomorrow
The morning shall tell"* (page 37).

Such lines are written to capture the weight and meaning of a glorious moment that will be considered a watershed in American history. Its tone is celebratory and closes with a sobering reflection that articulates the question of what events might follow the day. How history would

record Obama's performance as an African American, an American president, and a world leader would remain unknown at that point and Abdul-Rasheed's words squarely grasp the excitement of the unknown moment. The project of the anthology is to name the emotional weight of that moment in which the United States would see its first man of African descent in the white house and collect the manner in which many have reflected upon this through poetry.

At the same time, however, the subtitle claims that the collection is one of 'transformational poetry' and I am left unclear about in what sense the collection of poems is transformational. As a whole, the poems all seem a bit *overly celebratory*. As the book was published in 2016, it appears that there surely was time for some reflection upon the meaning of a black presidency that could be brave enough to critique its knight in shining armor.

Aside from this, many of the poems seem to uncritically conflate the politics of blackness - many writers rehearse a slippage between the African-American experience and the African migrant experience in the United States. Certainly, both groups have been on the receiving end of some form of societal exclusion and institutionalized violence. However, these experiences, in my reflection, are historically different. To suggest that Obama is representative of the descendants of the enslaved whose rise to the white house is the answer to the prayers for true social equality is dismissive of the specific routes of blackness that both African-Americans and continental Africans must carefully navigate in the United States. That President Obama's blackness is meaningful should be obvious, however, to suggest that his election was somehow the sign of the coming erasure of America's race problem is unwise. For example, the beginning lines of Niyi Osundare's poem "Obama," (which opens the entire anthology) reads:

*"The hand that once picked cotton
Has grabbed the crown
The whip which once cut like hateful blade
Has become a wand in the hand of the slave"*

Such an equation found in the election of President Obama weds the story of the son of a Kenyan immigrant and Anglo-American with that of the African-American everyman. Not only is this problematic insofar as it presumes his ability to readily identify with the cultural trauma of enslavement, but as well, the implication that a mere presidential election can signal the death knell of racial prejudice and structural discrimination is troubling. This sentiment that Obama's inauguration has the potential to undo or repair the immoral legacy of chattel enslavement of black people seems to run throughout the collection. In the same piece, Osundare imagines for the reader that Obama's inauguration would be essentially pleasing to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. - a black leader considered a terrorist by the American state and whose political and economic philosophy pushed him toward the antiwar movement and toward socialism - who might smile at the sight of a black man accepting the throne of American imperial power, however 'cautiously' in his grave. Perhaps in 2008 African-Americans would feel utterly hopeful that some significant change was on its way, but by 2016 (the year of publication for this anthology) I would imagine that many, like myself, felt a bit disillusioned and less hopeful that President Obama would mark the beginning of a profoundly new era in American history. Knuckle-dragging in the face of police murdering unarmed black people around the country, calls for respectability on the part of black men (and publicly articulated at one of black

America's most prestigious institutions, Morehouse College) as opposed to firmly dealing with structural racism that actually better explains the kinds of disempowerment from which too many people of color struggle within, and seeming inability to forge new paths regarding international policy has contributed firmly to my agreement with Audre Lorde that perhaps the "master's tools will not dismantle the master's house." Here, we are referring to the white house. Reading this anthology leaves me with crucial questions: what was so transformational about an Obama presidency? Were we changed by witnessing his tenure as an American president and world leader? Was the American political machine transformed by his presence? What were we actually 'Hope-ing' for?

Regarding the fact that much of the poetry included in the collection was composed by African writers, we should take into account the global impact of the news that the United States had elected the son of a Kenyan man - named Barack Obama - as its leader. Surely, considering the political, military, and economic influence that the United States wields on the world stage and on the African continent, such a fact was undoubtedly meaningful to Africans, in particular, who rightfully yearned to see themselves represented more positively and more powerfully in such prominent light. Barack Obama would definitely not be the first black president in the world; however, he was the first to be POTUS - and he was a less distant relative than African-Americans. Barack Obama was representative of a future now made possible by virtue of his firm inclusion and leadership in international political context. No doubt, this fact carries many meaning. As such, one highlights that this collection offers is a diasporic compendium of voices that each shares some piece of the emotive power of witnessing of their one sons rise to the highest office of the United States.

All in all, *Obama-Mentum* reads easily, albeit cautiously at times, and positively remembers the weight of the 44th President of the United States' inaugural day. It tempts the reader to enjoin in celebration and praise of this watershed moment. The praise poetry beckons us to wrap ourselves up in the catharsis that so many of those of us who pray for deep and lasting positive change profoundly need. At the same time, the inauguration of President Obama did not actually mark the coming panacea for the societal ills that plague us all. His initiation into White House politics did not provide the medicine that we need to adequately combat institutionalized ignorance and economic stagnation. Instead, the coming months after his leaving office would reveal the pestilence of white nationalism and crude nativism that bubbled beneath the veneer of a post-racial dream in resentment of a competent black president. Presently, we stand dumbfounded by the rugged populism that elected a tacky charlatan and petty troglodyte to boastfully waddle behind the poise and reserved stride of Obama. Like a photograph, unable to give the onlooker full view of what stands behind the camera's flash, this anthology likewise remains stuck in time by offering little to provide us deeply considered thought and tough questions that might carry us forward.

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