*I was in my early thirties when I wrote Dreams from My Father. At the time, I was a few years out of law school. Michelle and I were newly married and just beginning to think about having kids. My mother was still alive. And I was not yet a politician.*

*I look back now and understand that I was at an impor­tant crossroads then, thinking hard about who I wanted to be in the world and what sort of contribution I could make. I was passionate about civil rights, curious about public ser­vice, full of loose ideas, and entirely uncertain about which path I should take. I had more questions than answers. Was it possible to create more trust between people and lessen our divides? How much did small steps toward progress matter—improving conditions at a school, say, or registering more people to vote—when our larger systems seemed so broken? Would I accomplish more by working inside existing institu­tions or outside of them?*

*Behind all of this floated something more personal, a deeper set of unresolved questions: Who am I? Where do I come from? How do I belong?*

*That’s what compelled me to start writing this book.*

*I’ve always believed that the best way to meet the future in­volves making an earnest attempt at understanding the past. It’s why I enjoy reading different accounts of history and why I value the insights of those who’ve been on this earth longer than I have. Some folks might see history as something we put behind us, a bunch of words and dates carved in stone, a set of dusty artifacts best stored in a vault. But for me, history is alive the same way an old-growth forest is alive, deep and rich, rooted and branching off in unexpected directions, full of shad­ows and light. What matters most is how we carry ourselves through that forest—the perspectives we bring, the assumptions we make, and our willingness to keep returning to it, to ask the harder questions about what’s been ignored, whose voices have been erased.*

*These pages represent my early, earnest attempt to walk through my own past, to examine the strands of my heritage as I considered my future.*