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Opinion

Who's black enough?

Obama's ethnic credentials come under unfair scrutiny.

By Brian Copeland
July 27, 2007

Are you black enough?

Despite the rising American death toll in a divisive war, record gasoline prices and homes lost to foreclosure in historic numbers, this was the one question that I knew Sen. Barack Obama would be asked by Internet voters at the Democratic CNN-YouTube debate.

It is a question that dogs not only the first viable African American presidential candidate in our nation's history but all blacks who defy some intangible, inexplicable standard for racial authenticity. Why is this question still being asked in 2007?

As a middle-class black man, raised and currently residing in the suburbs, I too have been the target of this question. Not too long ago, I received an anonymous letter at the radio station where I work. It was clear and concise: "As an African American, I am disgusted every time I hear your voice because YOU are not a genuine black man!"

That letter inspired me to explore why this charge continues to be leveled at me and other successful black professionals. It's a comment I've heard for years from people both black and white. "You're not really black."

Why do people say this to me? Is it the way I dress and speak? The music I listen to? The fact that I TiVo "Frasier"? More important, who has the right to decide what it means to be "genuinely black" in this society?

The dilemma facing the senator and me is not new, nor is it unique. The race police exist in all hues and all cultures. As Obama and I have been labeled "Oreos," Asians considered too Eurocentric by their ethnic peers get taunted as "Twinkies" who are "yellow on the outside and white on the inside." Latinos accused of racial betrayal are labeled "coconuts." A well-known network newsmen told me he gets letters calling him a "self-hating Jew" because he reports without bias on the Middle East.

The disturbing irony is that demonizing people who don't fit a preconceived notion of ethnic authenticity reinforces and perpetuates bigoted stereotypes.

Obama cited his difficulty in hailing a cab as his black "credentials." I can also virtually guarantee that there have been times when he has been followed from aisle to aisle in a store by a suspicious manager, stopped for a nonexistent reason while driving in the "wrong" neighborhood, subjected to the dreaded N-word and accused of a transgression he had nothing to do with. I don't, however, see these elements of racial discrimination as being the entirety of the black experience in America.

Obama is a graduate of Columbia University and Harvard Law School. Upon graduation, he had his pick of job offers from 100 of the top law firms. He was a university lecturer, a civil rights lawyer, a community organizer and a state senator. And now he is one of the handful of nonwhite U.S. senators in this nation's history. Despite all of these achievements, everyone from voters to Newsweek magazine wants to know if his blackness is authentic enough.

On the other hand, if you go to the street corners of Oakland, Baltimore, Detroit, Compton or any other major urban area in the country on a given night, you'll find guys selling crack, guys with five babies by five different women, guys headed to jail and guys just released from jail, gang bangers and pimps along with hustlers and dealers. Nobody is questioning their racial authenticity. Nobody is saying that they're not real black men.

How and when did we come to the point where black people in America are defined by the lowest common denominator? When did the bottom rung of the ladder become the expected norm, and those who strive for things greater become racial anomalies?

Obama's experience, like mine, is filled with as much pain and joy, as much happiness and sorrow and as many frustrations and rewards as any American with a similar complexion. His is the true African American experience because it is his experience, as my experience is true because it is mine. He has persisted and persevered. If these qualities are not the hallmark of blackness in this country, nothing is.

Brian Copeland is the author of the stage play and book, "Not a Genuine Black Man," published by Hyperion. The play is the longest running one-man show in San Francisco history.

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