

CRABS

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Hardly had Senator Barack Obama announced his candidacy for the presidency of the United States before the media were deluged with reports of African Americans asking is Obama black enough? Within hours the question was bleating, baa baa, back and forth among black sheep throughout America as they were shepherded to that place where the fleecers wait with their shears humming. These are some of the same Negroes who said give

Clarence Thomas a chance, who admire Condoleeza Rice despite her odious politics because “she’s so smart,” who dubbed Bill Clinton the first black president after he had sent Haitian refugees back by the boatloads to be hacked to pieces by remnants of the Tonton Macoutes. These are some of the same Negroes who diligently ferret out the lone corpuscle of black blood in Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, Warren Harding and Calvin Coolidge, proudly claiming and proclaiming them as one of us. But Barack Obama’s self-identification is, for them, somehow suspect.

The painful irony of it is almost lost in the farce of faith-based-dollar-grubbing preachers, book peddlers, pimps, eunuchs, former FBI informants and other black “spokespersons” shamelessly wrapping themselves in the rhetorical equivalent of an apron and bandana to play the role of scolding mammy. “Don’ git beyon’ yo’sef, boy,” Mammy would have cautioned back in the day, mindful of the risk of retribution to the entire slave community whenever any black man assumed himself the equal of any other man. Today, with an absurdist twist, it’s “You ain’t black enough to be president.” But the self-regulating function of the enslaved community, embodied in Mammy’s modern mouthpieces, is the same: keeping black people in their place.

Viewed objectively, it’s really a marvelous feat of social engineering, in which those who have been programmed become the programmers of their own enslavement in perpetuity. And from the looks of things, the peculiar institution will likely continue to provide an annuity to the descendants of our former owners for many decades to come. Oh, for a twenty-first-century Harriet Tubman to come and drag a nation of house Negroes kicking and screaming from the chains of mental slavery into the freedom of self-love and solidarity.

Can anyone imagine Hispanic or Asian leaders, without any analysis of a candidate’s platform, standing before the media and asking if that candidate is brown enough or yellow enough? Can anyone imagine Jewish rabbis or members of their congregations clawing at one of their own like crabs in a barrel? Can our so-called leaders check their egos long enough to allow at least the possibility that a brother other than themselves might have something of value to offer? Okay, maybe that’s asking too much. Maybe that’s just the nature of our barrel-bound, crustacean-minded culture – to claw or be clawed. At least we’re all at the bottom of the barrel together.

By “black,” Obama’s critics, of course, refer to a culture particular to the attitudes and experiences of former slaves and their descendants in America, as distinct from the cultures and attitudes shaped by the oppression of Africans under European colonialism. Beyond the silliness of “my oppression is worse than your oppression” is the implication that no one but an African American (e.g., Clarence Thomas? Condi Rice?) could possibly be sensitive to our issues or any assistance to us in our struggle. But Barack Obama was born in Hawaii, a state in the United States of America. That would make him African American, not African-American, as some have attempted to draw the distinction. Moreover, he has lived most of his life in America, where most people have regarded him as African American and have treated him as African Americans of similar education and attainments are treated. But if a cultural difference between Obama and the rest of black America means that he has been spared the affliction of our crabs-in-a-barrel proclivities, we should all thank God and shout hallelujah.

As voters, we have a civic obligation to question the qualifications of every candidate for public office, especially the office of president of the United States. How about is he intelligent enough, since the current crisis in the White House is one of criminal incompetence? How about where does he stand on the environment, on imperialist aggression, the rape of other countries’ resources, the assassination of leaders of sovereign nations? What are his views on the military-industrial complex, the prison-industrial complex, the deficit, shrinking dollar and impeding collapse of the U.S. economy? Where is he on lying to the American public? But black enough? Compared to whom? Andrew Jackson? Calvin Coolidge? Hillary?

Here’s a candidate with a Harvard Law degree, who looks black, sounds black, is married to a black woman, lives in the black community, goes to a black church and who headed for the streets on the Southside of Chicago to work for poor black people when he could have gone to Wall Street. Like so many others, he could have “gone for self” instead of service. He could have gotten paid. But Obama made a different choice. And perhaps that is what makes him seem so unfamiliar, so un-American, so unlike some of us.