

## GARY YOUNGE

## Obama: Black Like Me

Less than ten years ago I found myself one Sunday in a white Baptist church in rural South Carolina listening to a sermon titled “Surrounded” and sincerely wishing I was somewhere else.

For more than an hour I sat there, gradually realizing that my own considerable discomfort was dwarfed by that of the worshipers around me. The stares I received betrayed not hostility but genuine confusion. In a segregated town that was 60 percent black, my presence in this white space was itself a statement. But about what, no one knew.

The eyes fixed upon me desperately sought answers. “What are you doing here? You know the rules. Everybody knows the rules. We don’t go to your churches, and you don’t come to ours. Why are you doing this to us? What do you want?”

When the sermon was over, I tried to leave as quickly as I could, but a hand caught my shoulder.

“Welcome. I’m so glad you came,” said one woman.

“Thank you, I’m glad to be here,” I said.

On hearing my voice her face relaxed a little.

“You’re not from here, are you?” she said.

“No, I’m from England,” I said.

As the words were repeated all around me a small crowd formed. “He’s from England,” “He’s English,” I could hear people muttering as a mini-stampede came to shake my hand and greet me. I was English. I was not their problem. I would not be coming back.

As a black Briton I know a thing or two about white America’s comfort zone around race. The wariness at the sight of me and the relief at the sound of me can leave doors half-open that might otherwise be firmly shut. American racism has me pegged somewhere between the noble savage and the idiot savant—it adds twenty points to my IQ for my accent but docks fifteen for the bell curve.

Watching the orgy of interest in Illinois Senator Barack Obama these last few weeks reminds me of that Sunday morning in South Carolina. It is rare to have a Democratic black politician simultaneously on the front cover of *Time*, *Harper’s* and *Men’s Vogue* and the subject of four mostly adulatory op-ed columns in the *New York Times* in five days.

Obama is, of course, a worthy subject. He is the smartest, savviest, handsomest and most charismatic man in the Senate—sadly, the competition is not great. In an era when America’s political class lacks character and intelligence, he stands out. What little the nation has seen of him, it has liked. But none of this quite explains the magnitude of the Obamathon currently taking place.

Perhaps what the nation has liked most is not what Obama has said or done but what he is. In short, Obama is a black man who does not scare white people. This is mostly not Obama’s fault. He is who he is. He has a life to live, a job to do and a book to promote. He cannot be held responsible for a white paranoia that—outside the music, sports and entertainment industries—demands: If you have to be black, then please don’t be too black.



It is impossible to understand his currency or his trajectory without taking this into account. Describing the crowd’s reaction to him in Rockford, Illinois, *Time’s* Joe Klein noted: “The African Americans tend to be fairly reserved.... The white people, by contrast, are out of control.” White commentators get out of control too. David Brooks wrote, “With his multiethnic family and his globe-spanning childhood, there is a little piece of everything in Obama.” Klein has ranked Obama alongside Colin Powell, Tiger Woods, Oprah Winfrey and Michael Jordan as

“black people who... seem to have an iconic power over the American imagination because they transcend racial stereotypes.”

Quite how a person “transcends” anything to do with race in the United States in 2006 is difficult to fathom. In a country where whites were five times more likely than blacks to believe that racism played no part in the Katrina debacle, you are far more likely to “transcend” gravity. This is not just true for blacks. Remember Hillary Clinton’s display of ebonics in Harlem on Martin Luther King Day? Sister girl took it to a whole new level.

But Obama does not have to try so hard. He was raised in Hawaii and Jakarta by his white grandparents and mother and Indonesian stepfather. He brings with him no familial tales of slavery or Southern segregation—his father was Kenyan. He does not have the “messianic style” that Columbia professor Manning Marable notes is characteristic of that generation of African-American leaders raised in the church. He came up through academe. Not only did he not attend the March on Washington, he was only 2 at the time. He is the first prominent black politician of the post-civil rights era. (Condi was born the year of *Brown v. Board of Education*, in Birmingham, Alabama. She knew one of the girls killed in the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. Just two reasons she should know better.)

All of this has made Obama prey to the soft bigotry of unreasonable expectations from both right and left. White people find a black man they can deal with, and they want him to be everything: Martin Luther King, John F. Kennedy, griot, President, Vice President, motherhood and apple pie. (Though it should be noted that whites who say they’re keen on black candidates often don’t vote for them.)

These expectations have little to do with either Obama’s compelling qualities or his flaws. Obamarama was already in vogue when he joined the Senate as a principled antiwar advocate. Those lefties who wanted him to explode on entry were always going to be disappointed. No black man ever walked into a room of ninety-nine white people, laid down the law and lived—not professionally, anyway. But that is no excuse for endorsing Joseph Lieberman and voting to confirm Rice, to name just a couple of disappointments over the past two years.

I still wonder how long that warm greeting in South Carolina would have lasted if I had said I was coming back next week. And I wonder how warm a reception Obama will get if he says he will run next year. ■

Copyright of Nation is the property of Nation Company, L. P. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.