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COMMENT

Black, Canadian and rooting for Obama

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LAINA DAWES
 SPECIAL TO THE STAR

As a Canadian fixated on Senator Barack Obama's presidential campaign, I have occasionally had twinges of guilt over my fascination with the political happenings across the border.

Recently a fit of rage led me to try to reach through my television set to choke a legendary CNN host during one of his usual thinly veiled racist tirades. After I regained my composure, I questioned my allegiance to Canada because of my anger over something happening in another country.

In my defence, the negative dynamics of race and gender that have emerged during the Democratic nomination battle are not only of interest to me as a social justice activist, but also because part of my livelihood is based on studying the issues. As a freelance journalist and editor for the "Race, Ethnicity & Culture" section for Blogher.com, I watch and read various reports daily and provide commentary.

Since the race for the nomination began last summer, there have been a number of racially tinged attacks by the Clinton campaign, media and political pundits. Despite Obama's achievements, they attempt to use racial stereotypes and sweeping generalizations to discredit his campaign. It's a disturbing reminder of how some will play the race card, despite boasting of their allegiance and history of support to the same racial demographic.

Some of the generalizations, such as the stereotype of the angry black militant being used against Obama, have been commonly employed to discredit other blacks.

Witnessing an all-too-familiar, below-the-belt racial punch angers me, but I wanted to find out if it affected other people geographically distant from the fight. I decided to ask black Torontonians their opinions on what social changes might occur for black Canadians if Obama goes on to become president.

Are we, as has been suggested by the media, a monolithic group, blindly supporting anyone because they are black? How does residing in a different country change our perspective, if at all?

More people than I expected are watching the primaries, following the debates and forming strong opinions. Public relations executive Gillian Moody feels Obama's race as a factor in his Canadian popularity is overblown.

"I think that black Canadians are secretly proud and fascinated, but they are not going to bring up race and talk about race in the way that American blacks and non-blacks bring it up. ... In general, I think that Canadians are more skeptical than Americans."

Aluba Kalu, a business development co-ordinator, is hopeful that a black president might help dissolve racial stereotypes, partly because of the popularity of American culture amongst black Canadian youth.

"Black Canadians do not really have that one defining moment in their history," she says. "Whatever we experience here is just the by-product of the African-American experience."

When I asked whether a black president might inspire more black youth to enter politics to Moody

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and Selwyn Pieters, a lawyer with his own firm in the financial district, they indicated I might be pushing it.

Moody believes Canada already has black Canadians in respected political positions and does not see why they would look to another country for inspiration. Pieters believes an Obama presidency might help in easing racial barriers to climbing the Bay Street corporate ladder. "There are a lot of Canadian businesses that do transnational and international transactions," he says. "If they do not start reflecting diversity, they will not create new business opportunities stateside."

"Barack represents many things, and one of the greatest is change," says Jane Musoke-Nteyafas, a writer, poet and cultural critic. "I believe that racism may improve in Canada, as he has already shattered several cultural and racial biases simply by showing that an African-American man of East African descent can run and be successful."

I fear that stupid prejudices could rob Americans of a president who could improve their lives.

Though it is too early for black Canadians to forecast how Obama's campaign will shape our future, all we can do is hope for the best.

Laina Dawes is a Toronto-based music journalist and editor for the Race, Ethnicity & Culture section for [Blogger.com](#).

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