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# What If 'Them' Were Really Us?

October 16, 2008 | By Frank Harris

It didn't start out this way. When the campaign season began, race was a faint shadow beneath calm waters. But as Election Day has neared, a dorsal fin has appeared.

It has broken the surface.

It is circling, revealing itself in all its ferocity.

I have concluded that regardless of who wins this presidential election between Sens. Barack Obama and John McCain, the result will be a referendum, a benchmark on race.

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My conclusion came before McCain and Republican vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin all but called Democratic presidential nominee Obama a terrorist.

It came before some supporters at McCain rallies came to resemble screaming lynch mobs driven by fear, hate and controlled ignorance about "who Barack Obama is."

It came before an older white woman referred to him as an Arab, before a white family man said he feared an Obama presidency and before whatever latest splash in the ever-changing political sea.

My conclusion came as I was driving to work in New Haven one morning and listening to NPR's "Morning Edition" report on Obama supporters seeking votes in places where Democratic presidential candidates rarely go.

The place was the Appalachian Mountains and there was a white woman from an Appalachian town saying she had gone to school with blacks, was a Democrat, but had concerns about voting for Obama because he was black.

"It's just the fact that I think he will represent them," she said.

Her emphasis on the word "them" stuck with me long after I turned off the radio, got out of my car and walked to my office.

I thought about them, and how I am them.

Yes, I am them. As is my black wife, my three black daughters, my older black brother, my younger black sister, my black parents, my deceased grandparents and their parents on down the line, along with other black folks who are not kin of mine. Even Obama, who was not raised like most of the them whom the Appalachian woman and other Americans refer to as them, is considered them.

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There is nothing in the word itself that is insulting and derogatory. By itself, it is not a slur. It is nowhere near that other word that is used to refer to those black like me. Still, there was something in the way she said it that bothered me, troubled me, stirred me in a way that lets me know that I am something apart. Yes, something - not someone.

It is always in the back of my mind, and sometimes right out front, that I am them and that no matter what I do, I am seen as them and it is considered a negative no matter how prideful and positive I and others are about being one of them.

I was fortunate to have been raised to be proud of who I am as them. But it is clear to see that the lumping together of them was not a positive thing. I could sense it in her voice and tone.

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Them.

So in a previous debate when McCain referred to Obama in as "that one," it gave reason for pause. I am them - and that one. What more?

No one knows how this election will play out.

But it is clear that however it plays out, it will be a referendum on race.

So to the lady in that Appalachian town worried about Obama being concerned about the needs of them, and to the rest of America's nonblack Americans worried about what he will do for them, rest assured that as one of them, I want the same thing as y'all: life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

There are a lot of other them's like me who want the same.

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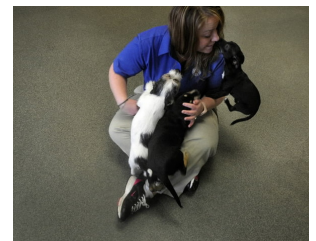
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