

“Being Black”: What is it cool for?



By **Dr Poonam Madar**, University of Surrey

Dr Poonam Madar lectures in Sociology and Criminology, based in London. Her research interests include race, gender, and popular culture. She blogs at: www.poonammadar.blogspot.com and she tweets as @PoonamMadar To find out more, visit Poonam's Facebook page at: www.facebook.com/PoonamMadar

Not so long ago I began temping in an office in Central London. In the first few days, one staff member (a black man) welcomed me and we exchanged ‘hellos’. But when I asked his name, his eyes signalled to the further part of the room where the senior managers were sitting and he laughingly, but sarcastically replied, ‘They call me equal opportunities.’ Before I could react or even have the chance to catch his ‘real’ name he was already out the door.

But our first meeting left an impression...

I swung my chair around and took a good look around the office. The majority of the workers were white, all the managers were white and predominantly male, and sure enough he was the only black person working there. Admittedly, I was embarrassed that I hadn't made this observation myself. Perhaps seeing white people occupy the majority of senior positions in an office is a sight that I've come to accept more and hence question less. As I sat there, I began to wonder what he had meant by ‘*they call me equal opportunities*.’ Did the presence of this lone black man tick the box for employers to show ‘equal opportunities’ are indeed, a reality? Or, was his presence supposed to reflect ‘*diversity*’ in the workplace? But then, did it really matter that he was the only black person there? Did it make any difference to how he was seen by his workmates?

Over the next few days I observed how Jay (I got his name eventually) interacted with his colleagues. With some he appeared rather jovial, and with others quite reserved. And yet, they all had something to say about him: ‘Jay's so funny’, ‘Jay's a bit of a ladies man’, ‘Jay likes to DJ’, ‘Jay's confident’, ‘Jay's so cocky’, etc. Clearly, Jay stood out, and in his own words he had come to occupy the CBK (**Cool Black Kid**) status. And yet, this sense of simultaneously being ‘black’ and ‘cool’ led me to wonder what it might have been like if there had been more black men working in the office. Who would be the ‘cool black kid’ then? And how exactly would his ‘coolness’ be measured? Or perhaps, more black people in the office would eliminate the label of a ‘CBK’ in a place made up by a majority of whites?

These thoughts, however, began to fade when my time as a temp soon came to an end... But then not long after I read a passage from Barack Obama's *Dreams From my Father* (2007: 82) and the same thoughts began to resurface:

*“Still, the feeling that something wasn't quite right stayed with me, a warning that sounded whenever a white girl mentioned in the middle of conversation how much she liked Stevie Wonder; or when a woman in the supermarket asked me if I played basketball; or when the school principal told me I was **cool**.”*

And there it was again – that word... **cool**. I went on to read more of what Obama (2007: 82) had to say:

*“I did like Stevie Wonder, I did love basketball, and I tried my best to be **cool** at all times. So why did such comments always set me on **edge**? There was a **trick** there somewhere, although what the **trick** was, who was doing the **tricking**, and who was being **tricked** eluded my conscious grasp.”*

I must have read the above passage several times over before I could fully grasp the important message that it conveys. On the one hand, the above quote establishes that:

- Obama likes Stevie Wonder (and his music), but this is only one musician and only one genre of music that he has come to appreciate;
- Basketball is probably one of many things that Obama is passionate about and one of a number of pastimes that he enjoys; and
- While Obama attempts to be **cool** (though how he might do this remains ambiguous) at all times, the way in which his coolness is seen troubles him.

On the other hand, there is no denying that in popular culture, black men are predominantly linked to sports and music (as well as crime). The problem is that wherever we look, we are constantly bombarded with the type of ‘**cool**’ that resonates with ‘**blackness**.’ From sports and multi-million dollar campaigns, to film and music with all the rap, hip-hop and dance videos and ‘*street-style*’ fashion – all these serve as endless reminders of what the experience of ‘*being a cool black*’ entails. This in itself can set in motion ‘common-sense’ thinking about ‘blackness’ and what it represents. It comes as no surprise, then, that the comments made to Obama always set him on **edge**; because of the effect that ‘common-sense’ thinking can have:

- **When such images are available to us in abundant repetition**, one can possibly lapse into ‘common-sense’ thinking that black men ‘naturally’ excel at sports and music (and perhaps not much else). The woman who questioned Obama about basketball for example, perhaps made him feel that she was asking a question based on ‘common-sense’ knowledge about black men in relation to sports rather than seeing Obama for being, well, just Obama.
- **When such images are available to us in abundant repetition**, this leaves little room for the diverse ways in which people can be seen and understood. This begs the question as to how the conversation might have been if the woman at the supermarket had asked Obama about what he liked to do in his spare time instead of quizzing him about basketball in particular. I wonder how the conversation might have been if the girl had asked Obama what kind of music he liked instead of emphasising how much she liked Stevie Wonder...

This also brings me back to Jay, the lone-black-man-in-the-London-office. Again, I wonder if the presence of more black men in his workplace would mean less room for the ‘**cool** black kid’ and more room for (black) individuals. Perhaps the latter might reflect workplace “diversity” in a way that being the only black person in the office simply cannot.

But as it stands, such images ONLY tell us of the ‘commonness’ that resonates with ‘being black.’ And when something becomes so commonplace, it is all too easily identifiable and hence label. Thus, the ease with which his ‘blackness’ appeared so identifiable was what brought about Obama's unease; and that is where the trick in being ‘**cool**’ lies...

That is, **when such images are available to us in abundant repetition**, this breeds familiarity. Familiarity does not pose a threat. Familiarity does not disrupt the everyday perceptions that can be taken for granted and remain unquestioned. For Obama, to be linked to Stevie Wonder, basketball and ‘being **cool**’ may have made him feel that he was *validating* the image that had been built up of him and his ‘blackness’ in the mind of others. There is nothing comforting in feeling that you *confirm* the “common-sense” views people have of you. Thus this familiarity tells you that you *fit* neatly into their box; familiarity tells you that your way of being is unsurprising; familiarity tells you that your way of being is, in a word, predictable.

It is for this reason that Obama treats the concept of ‘**cool**’ with caution; thus recognising that if one was to “lash out at your captors, they would have a name for that, too, a name that could cage you just as good. Paranoid. Militant. Violent. Nigger.” (ibid: 85; my emphasis).

Indeed, this informs us that there is much power in repetition; after all, are we not as equally bombarded with images of ‘black criminality’ as we are with ‘black coolness?’ Time and time again, these images inform us that this sense of ‘blackness’ militates between extremes; whatever can easily be identified as cool can easily be identified as uncool, and whatever can easily be celebrated, can just as easily be condemned.

Ultimately, being told he was ‘cool’ was always going to set Obama on **edge**; that **edge** being that very place where your ‘blackness’ exists in this continuum of belonging and un-belonging.

Such visions of belonging and un-belonging have come to light on several occasions for Obama (and his wife) as illustrated below; as evident in mainstream media and in the opinion of influential leaders such as Donald Trump:



And yet, the message to Obama still remains, do not lash out at any of the above depictions of you and your ‘blackness’, but instead, keep your cool, smile and carry on...

After all, what else would you have him do?

An earlier version of this article was written in March 2015 and originally appeared on www.poonammadar.blogspot.com

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Illustrations:

‘Barack Obama’ (2008) Front Cover of *Ebony*. From Google Images

‘Donald Trump Tweet’ (2014) from Twitter: <https://twitter.com/DonaldTrump/media> (Tweet on 25 November)

‘Obama and Michelle As Apes’ (2014) Belgium Newspaper De Morgen. From Google Images

‘Terrorist fist bump’ (2008) Front Cover of the New Yorker. From Google Images

‘Trumps & Obama’ (2016) Design and Photoshop Manipulation by Matt Ingram and Poonam Madar

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