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## **Birth of a Notion: Implicit Social Cognition and the "Birther" Movement** **Deeply held beliefs make it easy to accept the absurd**

By Steve Mirsky

Once, while visiting Brooklyn, I got a call from a fellow Bronxite, back on the mainland. When I revealed my location, he said, "Brooklyn?! What time is it there?" Despite the interborough bafflement, Brooklyn has been a genuine part of the land of the free since day one, that is, July 4, 1776. So when Lena Horne was born there in 1917, she automatically became a U.S. citizen. About 25 years later Horne was asked to give two concerts at Camp Robinson in Alabama, one to white servicemen, the second to black GIs. But she refused to do the second one when she saw that black Americans were sent to the back of the theater. Who got the good seats up front? German prisoners of war. Journalist Nat Brandt's book *Harlem at War: The Black Experience during World War II* quotes Horne as summing up the situation thusly: "Screw this."

Today, of course, the commander in chief of the U.S. military is black, and President Barack Obama gets the best seats in the house. A black president, however, causes great cognitive dissonance in some. But members of the "birther" movement have found a clever solution: Obama isn't really president! Because he wasn't really born in the USA!

Of course, he was, in Hawaii. (What time is it *there*?) So how could millions of people—a recent Daily Kos/Research 2000 poll found that 58 percent of Republicans, mostly concentrated in the South, either don't believe or aren't sure Obama is a citizen—be persuaded that the president is foreign? And how could high-ranking officers treat white enemies better than black patriots?

A part of the answer may lie in what's called implicit social cognition, which involves the deep-rooted assumptions we all carry around and even act on without realizing it. Harvard University psychologist Mahzarin Banaji is a leader in implicit social cognition research. She excavates the hidden beliefs people hold by measuring how fast they make value judgments when shown a rapid-fire succession of stimuli, such as photographs of faces.

At a talk she gave in October 2008 to a group of science journalists, Banaji discussed research she did with Thierry Devos, now at San Diego State University, that examined bias against Asians. They found that volunteers linked white Americans more strongly than Asian-Americans with, well, America. Banaji and Devos then decided to do what even they thought was a "bizarre" study: they had people gauge the "American-ness" of famous Asian-Americans, such as Connie Chung and tennis player Michael Chang, versus European whites, such as Hugh Grant.

The study found that white Europeans are more "American" than are nonwhite Americans in most minds. (Which brings to my mind former vice president Dan Quayle, who mangled the United Negro College Fund slogan into "What a waste it is to lose one's mind, or not to have a mind is being very wasteful.")

That result helps to explain how MSNBC's Web site in 1998 could have run the remarkable headline "American Beats Out Kwan" with a story on how Tara Lipinski defeated fellow American Michelle Kwan in a figure skating competition. A *Seattle Times* article quoted the then director of the Japanese American Citizens League, reaching for a silver lining: "Maybe there's a little progress in that they don't see Lipinski as a foreign name anymore."

Little surprise, then, that in a study done during the 2008 election campaign, Devos found that John McCain (who, ironically, was born in Panama, albeit at a U.S. naval base) was seen as more "American" than Obama. But even British ex-prime minister Tony Blair was seen as more "American" than Obama, a finding that nearly made me spit out me

bangers 'n' mash.

To borrow terminology from Obama's health care proposals, the birthers thus appear to suffer from a preexisting condition. A possible treatment is a recording by Aretha Franklin, who had no reason not to perform at Obama's inauguration. The song is entitled "Think." Because a mind is a terrible thing to waste.

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