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Op-Ed: **For blacks, a rift over Obama**, Two Princeton scholars clash over the president's record, but the real divide is between assimilation and racial unity.

By Erin Aubry Kaplan, June 19, 2011



Left to right: [Cornel West and Melissa Harris-Perry](#). (Ricardo DeAratonha / Los Angeles Times, Chaz Neill / PictureGroup / AP Photo)

It was the kind of insular, issue-driven, black-on-black debate that ordinarily doesn't attract the media spotlight, even on the slowest news day. But thanks to the unprecedented profile of Barack Obama, the most famous black person in modern history, this one got hot.

Last month, in an interview with Chris Hedges on Truthdig.com, Princeton professor Cornel West gave a scathing assessment of Obama's presidential performance so far. West let it rip with a kind of racially tinged dissatisfaction with Obama that's been brewing for months. Specifically, he called the black president out for what he sees as his complicity with the agenda of white, moneyed elites. He called Obama a "black mascot" for Wall Street, and at one point accused him of not acting like a "free black man."

The outburst prompted a swift and contemptuous rebuttal from West's fellow Princeton scholar and Nation columnist Melissa Harris-Perry, who described West's complaints as chiefly personal, not political, sparked by such things as Obama not returning the prof's phone calls promptly or giving him choice tickets to the inauguration. She went further, characterizing West's attack as "a self-aggrandizing, victimology sermon deceptively wrapped in the discourse of prophetic witness," and questioned whether his life of privilege (like her own) as a professor

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at an Ivy League university was any more authentic than Obama's.

Black folks on the blogosphere and elsewhere who were alarmed by the airing of dirty laundry between two of the best-known black scholars in the country weighed in, generally on one side or the other.

But the real divide is not between West and Obama or West and Harris-Perry, it's between two age-old, unresolved strategies black leaders have adopted throughout history to ensure black survival in America: nationalism and assimilation. Assimilation holds that blacks must claim their place in the mainstream to be successful; nationalism maintains that black success starts — and perhaps ends — with building and sustaining group unity. Fueling the latest image anxiety is a taboo question that animated the comments of an increasingly irate West: What good is Obama to us? By 'us' I mean black masses who are a crucial and historical part of the American working class and poor for whom West has always advocated.

Though she blasted West for his diatribe last month, Harris-Perry doesn't actually disagree with his view of the social landscape. Her defense of Obama also includes a view many blacks share — that the president, while hardly perfect, has been hampered by organized right-wing movements whose reflexive opposition to him is partly rooted in racism.

West is correct about Obama's lack of urgency about black issues. Perry is correct about the depth of resistance to Obama himself. But the combination of these two truths is hard to grasp: Obama is both the man in charge and the black politician stymied by the system he oversees. Broadly speaking, he is both the oppressor and the oppressed. This strange new fact feels like matter colliding with anti-matter, something that was never supposed to happen; black people, to say nothing of the media, don't quite know how to make sense of it.

But at least West and Harris-Perry are forcing into public consciousness a complex racial reality. After the collapse of the Black Panthers and black power in the '70s, assimilation became the black success strategy by default. The result was that assimilation — more precisely, financial and educational success — has happened for some blacks, but is beyond the reach of a vast number of others. The now numbing statistics about incarceration rates, inferior schools, entrenched poverty and the rest describe a population that, far from being integrated, still lives as a separate nation. That's all the more reason that blacks long to see President Obama as at least a sympathizer and fellow traveler rather than part of the institutional indifference that has proved as detrimental to black welfare as Jim Crow.

But Obama is a product of institutions. He is a fortunate middle-class son of the post-'60s, pro-integration era whose own success was due less to black empowerment than adherence to mainstream mores and values. Black nationalism or any clear support of black unity or racial justice is an anathema to those values; it certainly would have doomed Obama politically. This is true even though politically speaking, the president owes blacks as much as he owes Jews or any

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other constituency that voted for him in significant numbers.

The real problem with the assimilation-versus-nationalism battle is that it isn't really a battle anymore because black leaders, whatever philosophy they espouse these days, rarely put black interests first. Harold Cruse warned about this in his classic 1967 book, "The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual." In Cruse's view, the crisis then was a direct result of the black intelligentsia repeatedly abdicating its responsibility to assess black social conditions and craft action agendas entirely unique to America's racial history. As long as it deferred to integrationist approaches that didn't primarily have blacks' interests in mind, Cruse said, black people would always be reduced to reacting and protesting crises in the future. West's broadside of Obama is such a protest, though in it is a hope that a black man who is in a historic position to address the latest crisis will find it in his conscience to do so.

But putting aside the question of whether Obama is in a position to do much of anything, can principles of assimilation and black unity coexist at the top? Can they coexist at all? The big unstated fear among many blacks, including West, is that Obama will turn out to be yet another disappointing black politician, one who readily articulates the needs of those at the bottom but doesn't ultimately address them. That's a crisis of another color.

Erin Aubry Kaplan is a contributing editor to the Times Opinion pages. Her collected essays will be published in October.

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