

Those of you who deal with psychiatry know of the rare and tragic condition called [Capgras delusion](#). In this condition, the patient ceases to recognize his or her spouse, father, mother, another familiar person or even a pet. The patient is quite certain that this person they interact with, although he or she looks, talks, feels and smells like the original, is not the genuine thing - and many patients actually believe that the original was replaced with a replica, substituted by aliens, etc. In psychiatry there is a standard and plausible interpretation of these delusions in terms of rationalization.

This is called the “two-stage” model, following which [a] the patient’s experience is extraordinary and the delusion is an attempt to make sense of it. In this particular case, the model suggests that [a] the patient’s face-systems, upon seeing the person, deliver the appropriate interpretation (“this is my husband”) and activate the relevant person-file in memory, but fail to create the specific emotional signature previously associated with seeing that person; as a result, seeing the person creates an extremely unusual experience, which the beliefs about aliens contribute to explain in a way that is almost rational. (Note that this interpretation is [disputed](#) however).

Now, what about Kenyans in the White House?

Among the many crazy social movements that make up the rich tapestry of fringe politics in America, [the Birthers’ movement](#) is probably the craziest...

The main tenet of these people’s beliefs is a simple proposition:

Barack Obama was not born a US citizen

This is not just a matter of historical anecdote. It is crucial because the Constitution stipulates that no-one shall be elected to the office of President, who is not a “natural born citizen” of thirty-five years of age. So, if Obama was born in Kenya, he is not the legitimate president, he is a usurper, and it follows that all his official acts are invalid.

The birthers’ arguments are as follows:

[1] there is no proof that Barack Obama was actually born in Hawai’i, in the United States, as he claims.

[2] even if he was born in Hawai’i, he still would not be a “natural born citizen” because that status requires that you have no link to any other nation. As it happens, another nation has a claim on him. He could technically, using his father’s former British subject status, claim citizenship of the United Kingdom.

Legal scholars and other investigators have repeatedly demonstrated that both claims are valid only in the fertile imagination of the birthers.

Barack Obama was indeed born in Hawai’i of an American mother, his birth certificate, available on the White House website, has been officially confirmed by the Secretary of state of the State of Hawai’i as well as by the governor of that state, the birth was announced in local newspapers of the

time, the notion of a foreign nation having a “claim” on you is unfounded here and would be irrelevant in any case, etc., etc.

None of this has had any effect on the movement. Inevitably, it provides great fodder for [comedians](#). But why does the movement survive? What is going on? After all, if you wanted to oppose Obama’s plans and behavior you would have all sorts of much more rational ways of going about it. (Note that there is not much reaction against this fringe movement from official quarters. White House insiders have confirmed that the Obama administration is not at all displeased that a most vocal anti-Obama movement should be so clearly insane).

Why this deranged notion? Well, in the spirit of a pop psychology of the masses, let me offer the diagnosis that a large segment of the US population may be experiencing something somewhat similar to the Capgras delusion. That is, when they switch on their TVs and watch the news, they see someone who has all the trappings of a President, acts like a President, lives where the President lives, is treated by everybody as the President, signs bills like the President, gives a State of the Union address to Congress every year like the President... But these people at the same time have a clear and vivid intuition that:

This man is not the President

Now, once you have the intuition, in the same way as in Capgras, all sorts of strange beliefs may seem almost plausible, if they provide a good explanation for why this particular person, with all the right details, still does not quite ring true. In the “two-step model”, Capgras patients come up with alien abductions and suchlike to account for the Unheimlichkeit of their situation. More reasonably (these things are relative), the birthers come up with a conspiracy that this particular American is a Kenyan, that he forged his birth-certificate, that he made up an entire family history, that the entire world media agreed to cover all this up.

Belief in omnipotent conspiracies is a [great tradition](#) in American politics. Why this particular one, why now?

Some say this is just racism. That may be true but we should not stop there. Attitudes to race are complicated and do not reduce to the one-dimensional factor of distaste for another group. For instance, cognitions about ethnic, cultural and “racial” groups is modulated by [a] the extent to which you think of members of the group as sharing an “essence” ([more detail](#)); the extent to which you see them as a coalition ([more detail](#)); [c] the extent to which you attribute quasi-contagious powers to their presence ([more detail](#)); and many others factors. Importantly, some groups are seen as bad because they are incompetent, while others are feared precisely because they are seen as super-competent ([see here](#)). Some are hated for being lazy and others for being hard-working.

Where is Barack Obama in all this? True, he is black, but some have complained, specially before the election, that he was not “black enough”, meaning that he did not emulate the traditional themes, rhetoric and appearance of US black leaders. He is an ex-academic, a highly successful one, which over here is considered rather odd in any politician, and positively bizarre in a minority senator. To many he seems a bit Asian, given his childhood in Indonesia and the widespread belief that he is or used to be a Muslim. Plus, his mother was a white woman! (And an anthropologist.)

That is why it is difficult to be racist with this President. I mean that literally. He is neither fish nor fowl, which throws a spanner in the works of social cognition. Perhaps the collective Capgras experienced by a lunatic fringe is, precisely, a failure of racism, the failure of ordinarily pretty efficient intuitive systems to come up with a clear essential identity for the fellow who stubbornly carries on pretending to be the President.



Barack Obama and his mother, Ann Duham.