

An Obama Story

November 18, 2008

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[John Comaroff](#) is a professor of anthropology at the University of Chicago, where Barack Obama used to teach. Obama still lives in the neighborhood, Hyde Park. Recently, [on the radio show *Open Source*](#), Comaroff told this story:

We have a cleaner in our building — 70-something-year-old African American guy; sweet, sweet guy. And every evening he comes into our office about six and takes our garbage and stuff. ... He didn't come in on Tuesday — I was up late, working until I went to see election results.

Of course, Hyde Park was abuzz. Hyde Park thinks of this election as its own. And the fact that the Obama kids were at school on Tuesday and Wednesday, and we all had to ride around the TV cameras to get to our parking, was the kind of masochistic pleasure that we're having in Hyde Park, which after all has always been told it's the fringe of the nation. We've always been told that nothing we do or say counts anywhere else, especially not across the border in Indiana. So to suddenly find ourselves at the center of the political process is interesting.

So [on Wednesday] the guy comes into my office and I say "So, where were you yesterday?" "Ah," he says, "I was in Grant Park [where Obama gave his victory speech]." "Grant Park?" "Yeah, right near the front — I could have touched Barack Obama." "How did you get there? It's tough to get tickets."

He said "You don't understand. A few years back, I worked Law School, I cleaned the Law School. And Obama's office was on my run. He worked late many nights and he was really interested. I'd come by cleaning and he'd always stop me for a chat. Sometimes he'd share food with me — he always brought food in — and the thing was, he sat down and he talked to me. He said 'Tell me about your community. Tell me what's going on out there. I wanna know. I wanna know what's out there on the streets. I wanna know how America is living.'"

And one got the sense that this guy, alienated from the political process, alienated from the work process, found in Obama a real human being.