

Barack and Hillary

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Barack and Hillary went to Selma to connect with the important and difficult civil rights history of this country. Barack says he is Black enough to know that his roots are in Selma; Hillary says that she embraces the struggles that started here. They are each supposedly courting the Black vote; he as a Black man that some say is not Black enough, she as a woman who is married to Bill who sometimes has been called our first Black president. Whether this depiction makes any sense at all will be saved for another day.

All the election rhetoric aligns Barack with his race; mixed as it is, and also Black. And Hillary is aligned with her sex (she is female), and her gender (she is a woman). The usual race/gender, either/or split is in play: Barack is Black and Hillary is a woman. But actually one could as easily say, that Barack is Black and Hillary is white. Or, that Barack is a man, and Hillary is a woman. After all, each one has both a race and gender. He is a Black man and she is a white woman. Each one represents both race and gender. When pundits speak about either one of these candidates mobilizing the Black vote, it needs to be said that Black women are in a really tough spot here. Some of them embrace both parts of themselves. They are Black women and feel close to Barack because he is one of them; and Hillary because she too is female.

Hillary started courting Black women's votes in South Carolina about two weeks ago. She speaks to Black women's groups and asks them to break barriers with her. She silences the race issue and asks them to identify with her as female. She says this is an election for breaking barriers and she wants them to break the gender barrier with her, not Barack. She wants them to be female and not Black.

Hillary is now bringing attention to the fact that she is a woman. She openly asks "can a woman be president?" And answers, "yes". "The great thing about America" is that anyone can be president, it "just depends on the individual". But if this is the case—that the barriers can be broken by anyone—then what does she mean by a barrier in the first place.

If it matters in a good way, that Barack is Black then he should tell us why and how it will affect his policies and commitment to social justice. If it matters that Hillary is a woman, then say why it does. After all, many women are presidents of countries today. And we now have a woman Speaker of the House. We have women fighting in Iraq. We had a woman general in charge at Abu Ghraib. So why exactly does it matter that Hillary is a woman? And why is her whiteness not an issue while Barack's blackness is.

As well, Barack use your commitment to civil society to let us know more about what a civic-minded society will look like. Let us know that your cabinet will be filled with incredible variety and diversity with females and males who are committed to gender equity, good and affordable child care and health care, etc. Then it will matter less that you have a male body, and Hillary has a female one.

And Hillary, stop talking about your husband Bill. If you are running as an `individual' who happens to be female, then do not run as someone's wife, even if he was President. This just seems too much like the dynasties of India, Argentina, and elsewhere. Women do not want to elect someone's wife, nor do we want to elect a sexual decoy who says she is a woman and yet votes and stands hard-nosed so she seems tough like-a-man. Instead give us your policy initiatives on post-Katrina, an end to the Iraq war now, and an intelligent policy for global peace.

If you were both talking policy we could stop falsely talking about your race or gender. And then we could start really talking about how to change the racial and gender inequities in this society.

My most recent book is: Sexual Decoys: Gender, Race and War in Imperial Democracy (London: Zed Press, New York: Palgrave, 2007)