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Feminisms `08

Just at the moment that Hillary and Barack are beginning their unity tour it seems more important than ever to ask exactly what is being unified here. Supposedly Barack is courting Hillary's women and feminist concerns. But what and who is this really about? What about the rest of us women: the anti-racist white feminists, the Islamic and Muslim and Arab feminists, the black feminists, the radical sex-feminists, and all the rest of the feminist varieties. So if there is to be unity, we--the big `we'--want it to be a unity inclusive of diversity. Barack should be no stranger to this concept.

When Maureen Dowd speaks of Hillary's "rabid feminist supporters" she does no one any favors. And when WomenCount PAC took out a full-page ad in the New York Times stating "not so fast...Hillary's voice is OUR voice, and she's speaking for all of us"...well, no she is not. The ad continues by stating "we are the women of this nation...We love our country...We want Hillary to stay in this race until every vote is cast..." The `we' here is more than problematic. Hillary's campaign, with the huge assist of media journalists and newscasters, once again appropriated and colonized feminism in its homogenized mainstreamed form. This is a homogenized feminism that does not embrace diversity but rather ignores it.

Let me imagine, and hope, that an inclusive and progressive anti-racist feminism can become a heart and soul of the `08 campaign. And let me think about what Hillary and Barack need to do to let/make this happen by looking at what they each have said, and not said, done and not done so that feminism/s can continue to develop and grow as part of and integral to a larger politics. I have been an Obama supporter from the start with a commitment to pushing for new possibilities for radically inclusive feminist ways of seeing, talking, being, and doing politics.

Let us think backwards for a moment, not to trash anyone, but to get our starting points clear. Hillary waited a bit too long to endorse Barack and then when she did, she conceded but she did not embrace. She spoke to her white constituency and did not recognize that for women of color, and black women especially, his win must have seemed glorious for them. She spoke about the importance of her breaking the gender barrier, but not the historic importance of Obama's breaking the racial barrier. Instead, she said more subtly that "together they achieved milestones". Hillary could have said that Obama's win was a win for women in the struggle for racial equality but she did not. She could have said that his win is a triumph for all of us, but she did not. And the press coverage of her speech re-enforced the gender/race divide by saying that she finally had graciously ceded the nomination.

Hillary's campaign did not start out as feminist although maybe she now sees feminism of a certain sort as politically significant. We have yet to see whether or not

this is the case. The truth is that many women in this country embraced Hillary, more than she has ever embraced them. In her concession speech, and rightly so, she said she wants women to have “equality of opportunity, equal pay, and equal respect”. She asks for an end to all prejudices in our country. (Who does not *say* this today?) She spoke about her glass ceiling and the many cracks it now suffers. But if Hillary wants to speak for women today—in our polyglot forms—she has to challenge many of the very institutions and structural barriers that she has so far supported. We need a new kind of commander-in-chief not just a new tough female one. So Barack be careful taking your cues from Hillary.

Yes, Hillary has grit and fortitude, but most women *have* to have this grit to make their lives and their families work today. Most men do too. Most of us are working harder than ever and not achieving more. The American Dream is in shambles as people just try to find the money for food and gas. So please, Hillary, and Barack too, could we stop saying that Hillary has changed the view of what women can do. Most of us do not dream of becoming president, and for good reason. Why? It is not going to happen. Maybe a few very, very rich white women who are married to powerful men dream about being president. Really? But the rest of us? Please.

My point is simply that Hillary is a very power-filled woman who has run for president, and some have mistakenly interpreted this as though this makes her a spokesperson for ‘women’, what ever this grouping is supposed to mean. And although she uses much of the agenda of the white mainstream women’s movement of the 1970s she was not a part of this movement, then or now. Importantly, she ran a campaign that activated the remnants of this movement. But it holds women back to resort to the old clichés of liberal feminism: work hard and you can achieve any of your dreams. And, many feminists, especially black feminists like bell hooks, Barbara Smith, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, simply never embraced this agenda to begin with. Hillary cannot speak in ‘our name’ without recognizing the variety of who and what we are and need. Barack needs to recognize these varieties of feminist politics.

In the last week, Barack has rolled out his woman’s agenda as a lead-up to the ‘unity’ event in New Hampshire with Hillary. He has celebrated Title IX and what it has done for girls and women in sports today. He has spoken of his two young daughters and his wish that they have the same opportunities as any boy. He has called for equal pay for women with men. He speaks on behalf of easing the tensions and demands on working-women and extending the Family and Medical Leave Act. This all sounds right, but also derives from a feminism of old. So what more needs to be said newly, today?

Barack must learn from the black feminists who argued clearly that race and gender issues cannot be separated; that equal pay is not sufficient if there are racialized/engendered ghettos in the labor force that disproportionately limit all women, but especially women of color, to low pay jobs to begin with. Equal pay for low pay jobs is not enough. Some women are now accomplished athletes, doctors, and lawyers, but many more are home health aides, and waitresses, and service workers. And many of these low-pay workers are women of color from around the globe. Feminisms of many sorts recognize the unrelenting established forms of misogyny alongside its shifting and changing practices because neither gender nor race is an unchanging construct. So old feminist formulations are insufficient here.

As long as women are disproportionately responsible for domestic labor and child-care, focusing on equal wages, though urgently necessary, is also not enough. As long as the sexual division of labor demands that a majority of women have double and triple days of labor—domestic, child-rearing, and waged—women are not free to become equal, so-to-speak. This also means that after thirty years of feminisms in the U.S., Barack should know that the term “working woman” is truly problematic because it makes the labor of motherhood invisible, as though only waged women work. So how about some talk that really recognizes what women do. And, how about recognizing that misogyny exists in the very structural foundations of the institutions we live in and not just in the words and stereotypes that denigrate women. Of course sexism existed in the campaign. Where does it not exist? But it is also always shifting and changing, so Barack needs to speak the new truths to power here. He recognizes that he needs a new politics of race. He *also* needs a new politics of gender.

Progressive feminists of all sorts want a platform that recognizes that *all* women are working hard and that family and work is a false divide; that equal pay is a human right but hardly enough. But feminists of all differing identities—Black, Asian, Islamic, Arab, and so on also share a unified hope that wars will end, and budgets will be rebuilt for health care and schools and roads. Feminisms today recognize the need for female specific policies that also claim the shared and varied identities of all people. Most feminists from around the globe but who live here know that there must be a ‘just’ solution to the Palestinian struggle if the world is to ever know peace. Most women know that health care must be a human right. Women’s specific needs for pregnancy leave are understood as connected to a myriad of larger inclusive issues that affect all people. Feminists of all sorts get it. Each one of us is both similar and different to one another and we must find the points of connectedness.

This inclusive and emboldened kind of feminism is necessary to reject the onslaught against Michelle Obama that is mobilizing her way. The right-wing says she is angry and unpatriotic. Meanwhile she is a committed mother and professional woman, and seemingly not angry. Years ago, when she attended Princeton, her white roommate’s racist mother demanded that her daughter’s room be switched. So maybe there is reason for some anger? But she says she is not. If Barack cannot be made to be the angry black then it is all too easy to make his wife such. While at Princeton, she wrote a thesis asking questions about what the black person’s responsibility is to his or her home community after being educated at a white elite institution. How could this not be a good question to ask now, and especially then? Supposedly asking this question, all those years back, makes her a black separatist.

We might just have a black first lady soon. Just the wording itself is significant. She is female but *not* white and therefore not the usual ‘lady’. The first lady is supposed to set the cultural tempo—in clothes, and furnishings, and food, and... And Michele will do so. She is already doing so—one of the few political women who chooses to wear a dress. She will be the *first wife, and first mother, while being black*. The U.S. will have a black mother of the nation. No wonder there is so much anger thrown her way. Given the history of slavery and racism in this country, black women were not viewed as ladies. They have always been depicted more as slaves, or mammies, or domestics, or welfare recipients.

Misogyny, in its racialized history, is being thrown her way. She appears to those who hate or fear her as an inauthentic woman (read: not white) and authentic black (read: with a chip on her shoulder). She is made to be too independent, too radical, too sexual—not white enough. And this means that she does not have the necessities of white womanhood which requires whiteness. Simply being first lady and a black woman, even regardless of her politics, unsettles the white rules of femininity, motherhood, and family. It just may be that Michelle is more of sure bet for the change that Obama's campaign promises than Barack himself. She will not be making policy, as he will, but she will be shifting the whiteness of who is in charge of the white house, as home of the nation. This is not about Michelle Obama the person. It is about the legacies of engendered racism and racialized gender that she unsettles and moves forward. Barack needs to learn from the attacks on Michelle that the old kind of mainstream white feminism cannot work well enough for him or any of us.

One of the most exciting aspects of this presidential election is that it has the potential to make it clear that there are many kinds of feminism. But before this can happen, it needs to be acknowledged that Hillary is not 'the' arbiter of what women want or that her campaign's feminism is inclusive or informed enough. Feminisms as political movements shift and change with the world and with the changing systems of race and gender and class. None of this is static. Barack Obama may know this, and should know this. Whether he does or not, or acts on it or not, it is the responsibility of progressives in this country to push hard to move him to a more complex and radical politics. He might even agree...without radical voices of feminisms he may well be pushed elsewhere. And if the truth be told, I am betting on Michelle here.

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