

THE AUDACITY OF RACE*
e-racing whiteness

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First, a mention of my race story, given that I am white and writing this. I grew up in the civil rights era. I moved with my family to Atlanta, Georgia in 1964 where my father would teach at Atlanta University's predominantly black graduate center. It was a time of integration. We lived in the black neighborhood on Beckwith Street and I went to the newly desegregated white school that had just admitted its first black student that year. Initially, I would walk through my neighborhood and be called a "white bitch"; and by time I reached school I was a "nigger lover". My mother came to know, a much respected black surgeon in town through civil rights demonstrations. When she was diagnosed with breast cancer that year she asked him to be her surgeon. But at that time he did not have hospital privileges other than at the black hospital. So my mother went to the black hospital. Years later when reading her FBI file I saw that my mother was identified as black. It took me a minute to realize: black hospital, black woman. Who says race is not constructed? And yet it is also intransigent for people with black and brown and yellow skin.

Given the rancorous hyperbole of this presidential election, it becomes more important than usual to listen for silences and think about what is not being said. What are we not saying when we refer to Obama as black, and to Clinton as a woman? Yet Obama is repeatedly asked to address his 'race problem' while Clinton has recently and successfully silenced her gender rhetoric. It is more than significant to note that Hillary Clinton did not make a speech to address the issue of 'gender' while Obama spoke out about the issue of 'race' in the post-Wright controversy. One might respond that Obama was addressing the fall-out after the 'you-tubing' of his pastor Jeremiah Wright. And Hillary has had no similar problem with her gender. But this should not occlude recognizing that Obama got raced in this episode and Hillary was once again e-raced as having a race. She is silently white, while Obama is made noisily black. *And...* he is mixed race, not simply black, *and* there are many colors to our races in the U.S. that the black/white divide excludes.

Whereas Hillary proclaims her candidacy is important because it is breaking the glass ceiling on gender, Barack has never claimed race as part of his political capital. Instead, the Clinton campaign has been working to make it a deficit. If Obama is made 'black enough', Hillary can win. She will win because she is white, and not black, and not because she is a woman speaking on behalf of women's rights. As long as she seeks support from Reagan Democrats--white-male working and middle class voters—she will vie away from gender politics. Of course, this contest is also about gender—Barack is a man and Hillary is a woman *and* because race always has a gender, and gender always a race these are not neatly separate issues to begin with. But right now, gender is mainly silenced, alongside whiteness.

My point is that this contest is not about race in some simple sense. The term 'race' itself mystifies the reality of white privilege and often even trumps one's gender identity. Being white poses no problem for Hillary; but being black does pose a challenge for Barack as a minority person, mixed race though he is. If his mixed raced identity was taken at its full value and meaning he would actually been seen as a truly inclusive candidate. (His 'manhood' is already compromised and complex given the history of racism in this country).

Geraldine Ferraro's comment, that if Barack Obama were white he wouldn't be running for president, is now well-known. She added that he also would not be running if her were a woman. She thinks his race benefits him unfairly; that being black is an asset. Even my most reticent and conservative students couldn't fathom this statement. I guess she is simply forgetting the prisons, the poverty index, the unemployment rates among black youths, and people of color more generally. She assumes he is falsely worthy, and stealing Hillary's chance as such. This sounds too much like the Bakke case all over again: a white law student claiming that an unqualified black stole his place.

According to this logic, if only Hillary were black. She then could handily win the nomination. But then she probably would not be married to Bill Clinton who happens to be white, even if he was once referred to as our "first black president". And if she weren't married to him she would not have the necessary experience she keeps claiming. (The likelihood that she could be a political player and also part of an interracial marriage is not very great.) So maybe being black is not all that Ferraro and the Hillary campaign claim that it is.

Hillary is counting on the white and latina vote—be it older female voters or working class men. She is working hard to pull these voters away from Barack. And she seems more ready to simply count on the white female voter right now. It has always been problematic to me that feminism is most often assumed to be a white woman's thing...when so many of the earliest campaigns, against things like sexual harassment were actually articulated and fought for first by black women. In South Carolina Obama won 54 percent of the women's vote with 22 percent of white women voting for him; while 78 percent of black women did. We should not forget that black women overwhelming voted Democratic in the last presidential election; while many white women voted for Bush. It would seem that voting for Obama would be the very least white women could do to make up for the past eight years of war and economic ruin.

Nothing I have written so far is simply true. But it expresses how complex the relations between race and gender are. Obama's gender is racialized; and his race gendered. Same for Hillary. It is not gender vs. race. And it is not black vs. white. Obama was suckled and mothered by a white woman. His maternal grandparents were white. His Kenyan father was black African. He is part of both these genetic and cultural histories. Obama is marbled in a complex mix of his racial heritage. There are so many racial mixings in this country. He/they see more and know more simply because of this mix. But it is clear that some whites are not willing to see this.

The Rev. Wright controversy became an excuse to mobilize the dormant racialized aspects of this primary season. Obama chose to finally come at 'race' per se head-on. He said he deplores the divisiveness of some of Wright's statements, and yet he is family; like his white grandmother who also expresses unkind racial views. His family

expresses the contradictions of the larger society—prejudices and love at the same time. This is workable. This is a starting point. Barack asks us to continue from here.

Hillary keeps the Wright controversy alive because this keeps her whiteness silently in place as her privilege. She says, when asked what she thinks of the Rev. Wright “he would not be my pastor”. Of course not, Hillary; you would not go to his church in the first place. Given this kind of political strategizing Hillary plays the gender decoy as white. Although misogyny is directed at her it is not in reaction to a woman’s rights agenda. Nor should this unkind treatment of her as female be used to erase her privilege as white.

Bill Richardson, governor of New Mexico and former high-ranking member of Bill Clinton’s administration recently endorsed Obama. He says it is time for the party to recognize that Obama is the chosen candidate—by number of states won, by chosen delegates, and by popular vote—and move on to form a viable candidacy for the fall election. Meanwhile many observers and pundits say that it is all but impossible for Clinton to win the nomination at this point. Several even say that if it were Barack that had Hillary’s delegate numbers and popular vote that the race would be over *now*.

These same news-people say that unless she has a blow-out in Pennsylvania and the remaining primaries, and then gets the support of super delegates, she is done. But what does this really mean? It means that if she takes the white vote from Barack in the next primaries she can get the super delegates to support her. This is about the white, and sometimes latina vote whatever else its guise: working class, Reagan democrat, older women, Catholics, etc. (It is interesting when it is reported that Catholics are supporting Hillary it then is also made clear that these “Catholics” are disproportionately older white women.)

Hillary is white. Barack has the race problem, not Hillary. This is what white privilege means and it even trumps gender here. And the key is: how race-determined can Obama become? Black enough that many whites and latina’s won’t vote for him? If she steals the election with the super-delegate vote and actually runs against McCain in the fall, her whiteness will lose its cache. Will she shift to her gender then?

By the way, the super-delegates overriding the people’s vote would further undermine our fragile political state; another state of exception to our democratic processes. Some Americans might feel good in that we let a black man have the opportunity to run for president even if it just did not work out. But this would be a total heartbreak for many of us—using a black man as a cover for corrupt politics while choosing a white woman as decoy for commander-in chief. Both misogyny and racism would be the winners here.

So I am with my sister who says, the only woman I want to see in the white house is Michele. She has so much more experience for this position than Bill.

For more developed discussions of many of the points here please see my: SEXUAL DECOYS; Gender, Race and War in Imperial Democracy(London: Zed Press; New York: Palgrave, 2007);Against Empire;Feminisms,Race and the West(London:Zed Press; New York:Palgrave; Kali: India; Spinifex:Australia and New Zealand, 2004); HATREDS: Racialized and Sexualized Conflicts in the 21st Century, (New York: Routledge, 1996); The Color of Gender: Reimaging Democracy (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1994).

