Black Politics, the 2008 Election, and the (Im)Possibility of Race Transcendence

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When Barack Obama delivered the keynote address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, he was well on his way to claiming the open U.S. Senate seat once held by the only other black Democratic senator since Reconstruction, Carol Moseley-Braun. Although mostly unknown, the self-professed "skinny guy with the funny name," made a lasting impression. Secure in his own Senate race, Obama, a rising political star, spent much of the fall traveling the country as a surrogate for Democratic candidates.

To be sure, Obama's presidential candidacy is important and historical. It has prompted increased public discussions of race in America and expanded pathways to participation for all citizens. Obama's candidacy holds the promise of decades of black efforts to significantly influence Democratic Party policy and presidential policymaking. Yet, beyond the race of the candidate, the Obama campaign is remarkably mainstream. Obama has deftly crafted a public persona as the embodiment of the American dream—a black man whose life measures both the substance and symbolism of individual achievement, hard work, and ingenuity.[1] While accessing a national understanding of American values, he simultaneously invokes familiar tropes advanced by Booker T. Washington and others, which champion the rewards of hard work, conservatism, and moral uprightness as the keys to black equality. Moreover, Obama's policy platform adjusts to, rather than confronts, the centrist model successful employed by Bill Clinton and the Democratic Leadership Council in the 1990s.

Here we examine Obama's candidacy and other aspects of the 2008 election with the goal of identifying avenues of additional inquiry. In short, we attempt to situate Obama's candidacy in a grounded discussion of the impact of this election on black politics. We suggest that Obama's credible aspirations for the presidency rest in no small part on his articulation of himself as occupying liminal spaces, at once post-racial and post-partisan. We discuss the limits of Obama's version of race-transcendent black politics and consider the risks associated with linking the Obama campaign too closely to a broader understanding of black politics and black political progress. The essay is organized around three themes crucial to understanding present-day black politics: political leadership, political agency, and coalition politics.

Black Political Leadership and Presidential Politics

Black aspirations for political leadership have been shaped by insurgent and outsider politics. The successes of the civil rights movement put in motion a "new black politics" that facilitated gains in black office-holding and influence in local, state, and national politics (Tate 1994; Dawson 1994; Williams 1987). Many of the first blacks to win offices as urban mayors, state legislators, and congressional representatives did so by organizing outside of traditional party networks and forming independent organizations that allowed for somewhat autonomous black leadership (Tate 1994; Preston et al. 1987). Prior to this, black elected leadership was often criticized as being beholden to white political machines and thus not representative of black goals (Smith 1996; Walton 1985).

The central occupation of black presidential strategies has been "how to make the black vote a *strategic resource*" in advancing policies that address the needs of black citizens (Walters 1988, original emphasis). Since Frederick Douglass's 1872 vice presidential candidacy on the People's ticket (Equal Rights Party), blacks have sporadically mounted presidential candidates to "run against the prevailing political order" (Walters 1988, 114). In 1972, after a single House term, Shirley Chisholm launched the first national presidential campaign by a black candidate, challenging feminist and black organizations to "put their money where their mouths were" by supporting her primary bid. Although Chisholm offered a progressive antiwar, pro-choice, antipoverty platform and built a multiracial coalition comprised of women, blacks, and college students, neither the Congressional Black Caucus nor the National Organization for Women endorsed her candidacy. Chisholm, aware of her chances, admitted she "ran because someone had to do it first. In this country everybody is supposed to be able to run for president, but that's never been really true" (quoted in McClain, Carter, and Brady 2005,

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56). Her candidacy was a challenge to the idea of the presidency as a white male domain and an attempt to increase Democratic Party inclusion.

Like the Chisholm campaign, Jesse Jackson's 1984 presidential run divided black leadership even as it increased black registration and turnout. Unlike Chisholm, however, Jackson's campaign featured serious attention to the development of a broad-reaching and detailed progressive platform on domestic and foreign policy (Smith 1996). Jackson's campaign was sidelined by the media and Democratic insiders who complained that since Jackson was inexperienced and unlikely to win, he was undermining the party's chances at regaining the presidency (Tate 1991; Morris 1990; Reed 1986). As such, Jackson struggled to define his candidacy in the media, garner attention for his policies, and raise funds to keep his campaign afloat. Jackson's campaigns were clearly rooted in the black community. The support of the black church was instrumental for its voting and fundraising capacity. Jackson's initial campaign was so cash-strapped that, according to one account, Jackson personally worked the crowds for donations at churches, gospel conventions, speeches, and rallies (Walton 1985, 158).

Obama's presidential campaign looks familiar, but it differs considerably from past black candidacies. Like Chisholm and Jackson, Obama ran as an outsider. He used his skills in grassroots organizing to create strong community networks that have had impressive success, especially in caucus states. Also like Jackson and Chisholm, Obama has enjoyed strong support from college students; however, the breadth of Obama's support outside of the black community has far exceeded Jackson's rainbow coalition. Although his campaign has elements of typical black insurgent efforts—his outsider, underdog status; the development of an independent fundraising base; and reliance on the black vote—it is singularly unique in that Obama's campaign is only loosely connected to the black community. His management team is largely made up of veteran white Democratic Party insiders. A year before the start of the 2008 primary season, black voters outside of Illinois barely knew Obama; the media spent a great deal of that time debating whether Obama was "black enough" for black voters to support.

Perhaps the most significant departure is that the Obama campaign promises a version of race transcendent leadership that is independent of the black community. Cornell West writes extensively about the potential of race transcendent leaders to unify a diverse coalition of Americans around a progressive agenda. This leader originates in the black community and gains a transcendent quality by championing social justice built on a "tradition of resistance . . . a credible sense of political struggle . . . [and] authentic anger" about the urgent conditions facing black America (West 1993, 57–8). Former Chicago mayor Harold Washington's defeat of the Daley machine with a multiracial progressive coalition fits West's definition of the race transcendent leader as someone rooted in black social justice claims and appealing to the common humanity of all people. Alternatively, Obama deploys race transcendence strategically. The former is black-centered, while the latter is racially ambiguous. Unlike Martin Luther King, Jackson, or Chisholm, Obama has not tried to make black struggle a fundamentally American struggle. Instead, he gives equal weight to black demands for the full privileges of citizenship and white resentment toward those very demands. His race transcendence claim, "We are all Americans," functions as a condensation symbol, simultaneously affirming broad consensus on national values while ignoring structural inequalities that maintain black exclusion and subordination. Its danger lies in subsuming black demands in the category of "American" without addressing the substantive benefits of membership, the recognition of difference, of power, or of suffering.

A Brief Note on Race Talk and Surrogates in the Obama and Clinton Campaigns

As has long been true in presidential campaigns, the Obama and Clinton campaigns used surrogates to navigate the minefields of "race talk" revealed during the primaries. We mention them briefly here with the expectation that others will examine in more detail whether the role of surrogates in political campaigns evolved during this campaign season.

Surrogates provided political cover for the candidates by mediating contentious racial discussions. Like meticulously orchestrated photo ops, surrogates were selected with careful attention to race and gender as the campaigns sought to demonstrate their appeal to certain populations or stave off criticisms of racism or sexism. White women defended Obama against charges of sexism; white men explained that he was a patriot and was not elitist; and black men and women reinforced his authentic blackness. Celebrity endorsers such as Oprah Winfrey worked to draw out black crowds while at the same time reassuring white women that Obama was a safe choice. Likewise, high-profile political endorsers such as Senator Ted Kennedy or Governor Bill Richardson stepped in at crucial times, signaling to key constituencies that Obama remained an acceptable candidate. Surrogates, strategically chosen on racial or gender grounds, were used in offensive attacks against opponents as well. Hence, Clinton surrogate Bob Johnson, the founder of Black Entertainment Television, was able to make veiled references to Obama's former drug use while similar commentary offered by Bill Shaheen, Clinton's New Hampshire campaign manager, resulted in his ouster from the campaign.

Early race talk in the primary season focused on two concurrent questions. Blacks debated whether Obama was "black enough" while whites wanted reassurances that Obama was not secretly "too black." The role of black surrogates in the former case took the form of Obama's association with or repudiation by well-known blacks whose "racial authenticity" was well established. Probably the most memorable example occurred when civil rights legend and former UN ambassador Andrew Young suggested to an audience that Bill Clinton was "every bit as black as Obama." Although Young was chastised for his comments in both the black and mainstream press, the incident was widely reported across several news cycles. White surrogates also served as "character references" for Obama, bolstering his claim to be a different kind of black candidate and defending him against charges that he was sympathetic to black nationalists.

As the primary season progressed, race talk shifted from questions of Obama's racial identity to engage negative racial cues used by Democratic elites against other co-partisans. Republican strategists perfected the art of appealing to "underlying anti-black sentiments among Wallace/Reagan Democrats" with the Willie Horton ad used to defeat Dukakis in 1988, and Democrats mastered the tricky two-step of distancing candidates and the party from blacks while not alienating black voters with Bill Clinton's "Sister Souljah moment" (Smith 1996). What has not been seen in post-civil rights era Democratic presidential primaries, until now, is the use of implicit racial messages by white candidates to best minority primary contenders. Also new is the willingness of white surrogates to identify and directly confront racial messages. Consistent with Mendelberg (2001), Obama operatives responded quickly and aggressively, because key to curtailing the impact of implicit racial cues on the electorate is to make them explicit. That rejecting racial cues is no longer the work solely of African American spokespeople is promising; however, whether added weight is afforded accusations of racism or race prejudice when such claims are levied by white surrogates is problematic and requires systematic study.

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Hope and Independence? Black Political Agency in the 2008 Election

Black elected officials (BEOs) have typically enjoyed considerable latitude in their governing activities. BEOs have largely been able to pursue policy positions that are more liberal than their mostly black constituents with minimal blowback as long they support a progressive racial agenda (Fenno 2003; Tate 2003; Swain 1993). Prominent BEOs, such as civil rights activist and congressman John Lewis, endorsed Hillary Clinton and actively worked on her campaign in 2007, prior to the official start of the primaries. At that early stage, support for Clinton among BEOs overlapped with support among blacks more generally. There was a sense that, because of these endorsements and her husband's popularity among African Americans, Clinton would be competitive against Obama in black-majority precincts. Yet, when the first primaries were held in states with a large number of African Americans, blacks turned out overwhelmingly for Obama.[2] The black electorate registered a seismic shift in its evaluation of Obama's credibility as a candidate, but jumping ship was more difficult (and risky) for BEOs who had publicly endorsed Clinton and had more stake in the success of the Clinton machine. Publicly endorsing a candidate is a gamble where calling the winner correctly can result in significant clientage payoffs in the form of plum positions in the new administration or enhanced access should the nominee win the White House. For BEOs, the pertinent question became, "What do Obama backers stand to lose if he fails to win the nomination?" BEOs who hitched their political fortunes to Obama ran the risk of greater marginalization in what seemed likely to be a new Clinton administration.

In many ways, BEOs treated their endorsement of Clinton as business as usual. In previous elections, BEOs could offer or withhold endorsements with minimal consequence. With Obama in play, presidential politics were conflated with race loyalty, making the question of BEO endorsements a highly visible and contested decision. During primaries, endorsements from political elites convey important information about candidate desirability to activists, financial contributors, and party voters, signaling to constituents which candidate is preferable (Steger 2007). In this election, the signaling function has reversed as constituents are calling on their representatives to alter their decisions to reflect the will of the district.[3] Given this demand for delegate-style representation, BEOs may suffer real political consequences for being out of step with their constituents. Two representatives that maintained their steadfast support of Clinton, Stephanie Tubbs-Jones (D-OH) and Sheila Jackson-Lee (D-TX), countered their constituents' preferences quite publicly.[4] The nature and extent of potential political fallout is unclear. Less support at the ballot box is an obvious and immediate threat, but there are other externalities that BEOs must consider. If newly empowered black voters hold BEOs accountable on the Obama endorsement issue, they may transfer this independence and increased scrutiny to the delivery of policy benefits, which may in turn lead to increased dissatisfaction with languishing black leadership and create new opportunities for challengers.[5]

Non-elected black political elites are also challenged by the prospect of an Obama administration. Most achievements in civil rights and racial issues have come as a result of insurgent demands pushed by black political activists and organizations. BEOs, entrenched in the Democratic Party structure, are less inclined to organize protests that might undercut the Democratic Party and their standing in it. Organizations such as the NAACP and Urban League are expected to devise a black agenda and mobilize outside pressure to get pro-black policies enacted. Will the rules change if a black president sits in the White House? Will critiquing a black administration or making protest demands be perceived as traitorous? Making race-specific demands will be a more delicate enterprise if African Americans must tread the difficult waters of protesting against the first black president. One cannot be sure how this strategic uncertainty will influence the receptiveness of an Obama administration to black policy demands or how ordinary African Americans will evaluate intraracial disputes at the highest levels of government.

Black voters find their agency curtailed in this election as the media has once again debated the ability of black voters to make politically sophisticated choices. Black voters tend to vote as a cohesive bloc for Democratic candidates and common fate functions as a key determinate of African American opinion and behavior (Dawson 1994; Tate 1994; Gurin et al. 1989). The failure of Al Sharpton and Carol Moseley-Braun to garner black support in 2004 demonstrates that linked fate notions have not always translated into bloc voting for black Democratic candidates. Prior to the South Carolina primary, black residents became the center of national attention as predictions amassed about how they would vote.

Black political opinion was deconstructed in an unprecedented national conversation about the intersectional social and political space inhabited by black women in particular. Black women accounted for a third of South Carolina Democrats and were primed to be the "deciders" in the state's Democratic primary. Recall Obama's characterization of the historic nature of the election at the South Carolina debate: voters could for the first time decide between "a black candidate, a woman, and John Edwards." Black feminists have long noted how such statements do not connect gender and racial labels (i.e., black man or white woman), thereby reifying the notion that black men speak for all black people and white women speak for all women (Smooth 2006a; Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1991; Hull, Scott, and Smith 1982). Nonetheless and importantly, as if aware for the first time that black women navigate a social and political world that marginalizes them on the basis of race, sex, and class, news reporters camped out at beauty salons, book clubs, and sorority meetings in an attempt to uncover the cognitive dissonance created by having two candidates with whom black women share ascriptive characteristics (Brown 2008). For a time, black women's decision making was viewed as contested, thoughtful, and complex.

When Obama won the South Carolina primary, black vote choices were immediately characterized as the result of race solidarity and summarily dismissed by the media. Following Bill Clinton's comparison of Obama's black support to that of Jackson in the 1980s, the Clinton camp conceded the black vote to Obama and adopted a strategy that actively sought to frame subsequent black voter decisions as unimportant in the contest to decide the Democratic nominee.[6] The shift in public perception of the importance of the black vote after South Carolina recast black support as issue-less, uninformed, and forgettable. Embedded in this premise is the problematic assertion that black votes are legitimate measures of thoughtful consideration and political sophistication only when they are cast for white candidates.

Throughout the primary season, Obama was able to capture black votes without making significant concessions to the black community and certainly without being vetted on black issues. He has run a race-neutral campaign and has often been characterized as transcending race or having too much "integrity" to play the race card. Because black candidates have to work against perceptions that they will only represent their own racial group, African Americans who wage serious campaigns for statewide or national office often employ a deracialized strategy to attract white voters (Persons 1993). The end result for African Americans is that such candidates do not speak directly to racial issues or respond to racial cues (implicit or explicit) used

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by opponents. Obama has courted and encouraged this kind of campaign persona throughout his career. His past and current behavior demonstrates a willingness to bypass traditional gatekeepers (black power brokers in the Democratic Party) in favor of a certain degree of political autonomy (Becker and Drew 2008). Unlike many black politicians, Obama is not beholden to old-guard black officials, nor is he particularly beholden to black voters. His nontraditional path to politics highlights a latent racial puzzle implicit in Obama's presidential bid. Both his biography and path to politics distance Obama from blacks while increasing his attractiveness to white voters.

South Carolina was especially important for Obama because it provided him with a stronger foundation for his candidacy and proved that Iowa was not a fluke. Black voters posted record turnout numbers, contributed to candidates, attended rallies, and impacted the course of both campaigns at critical junctures. Bloc voting has given blacks a real chance to exercise their political muscle in this election, but there are limits. Although blacks are seen as instrumental to securing the party nomination, close association with blacks and their issues is often treated as an electoral liability by Democratic candidates (Smith 1996). Blacks, then, have had vital influence over determining the nominee, but not in determining platform positions. Writing in June 2008, we expect that general election appeals will be tailored to white voters and their preferences will drive the substance of the outcome. Thus, this election demonstrates one mechanism through which blacks can influence partisan politics, but that mechanism seems to have limited reach.

Race-ing Gender and Gender-ing Race: Coalition and Identity Politics in the Crosshairs

What happens when members of multiple marginalized groups compete for the same position in a zero-sum game? This question will have enduring implications long after voters have made their decisions in November. Having Obama, an African American man, and Hillary Clinton, a white woman, compete for a single, high-profile position expectedly invokes questions about whether voters (read: men or whites) are ready for a female or black candidate. The strategies used by both campaigns and their surrogates bring to fore historic disagreements between black race and gender advocates and white feminists. Debates emerging from the "silencing of race" in the women's movement echo loudly in the current election. The relegation of race to secondary status is seen poignantly in the contemporary writings of second wave feminist scholars and activists who elevate the significance of electing the nation's first female president while failing to contextualize or in some cases intentionally obscuring the raced and gendered contexts of this election. Gloria Steinem's endorsement of Clinton in a *New York Times* op-ed that situated Obama (and all black men) as advantaged over white women or women of color in the American political system is a case in point and marks a noteworthy turnabout from a white feminist who had extolled the merits of cross-racial/cross-gender coalition building a year earlier when Clinton was ahead in the polls.

In "Right Candidates, Wrong Question," an essay written nearly a year before the official start of the 2008 presidential primary season, Steinem dismissed reporters queries about whether "Americans [were] more ready for a white woman or a black man" with the conclusion that the question itself was "dumb and destructive" (Steinem 2007). The question was dumb because "most Americans" were "smart enough" to see through appeals based solely on claims of a shared racial or gender identity and destructive because it discounted the many occasions when "women of all races and men of color . . . have found themselves in coalition" (Steinem 2007). Steinem pointed to Clinton's 40% margin over Obama in early polling among African Americans as evidence of coalition potential and of the willingness of blacks to support a candidate based on issue congruence and long-standing relationships. She also noted that for the first time, Americans could choose between "two viable candidates who aren't the usual white faces over collars and ties" (Steinem 2007).

After Obama's victory in Iowa, with polls suggesting Obama's unstoppable momentum going into the New Hampshire primary, Steinem reasserted the centrality of identity politics in an op-ed in *The New York Times* that placed sexism squarely at the root of Clinton's faltering campaign. Obama's Iowa win, according to Steinem, followed a long standing "historical pattern of making change" by first extending opportunities to black men, and only later to women. "Black men were given the vote a half-century before women of any race were allowed to mark a ballot," she writes, "and generally have ascended to positions of power, from the military to the boardroom, before any women" (2008). Many white feminists share the view that persistent sexism has trumped racism (see, for instance, Burns 2005), and that black men, privileged more by gender than they are disadvantaged by race, may reach the presidency first.

Like Steinem, we find little utility in ranking oppressions; however, we think it useful to unpack and contextualize the interpretations of identity embedded in Steinem's (2008) second essay, "Women Are Never Front-Runners." She begins with a description of a hypothetical candidate that mirrors Obama's personal narrative in every way except gender. Pointing to gender barriers that are exacerbated by race, she concludes that "*[g]ender is probably the most restricting force in American life*, whether the question is who must be in the kitchen or who could be in the White House" (emphasis added). Steinem correctly asserts that the American presidency is neither gender nor race neutral. When women attempt to crack the hardest remaining glass ceiling, they immediately confront what Whicker and Isaacs (1999) term "the maleness of the American presidency." Additionally, racial prejudice further restricts the population of Americans who can credibly access the powers of presidential office. If women are bound by gender, then black women are doubly bound by their place at the intersection of race and gender (Gay and Tate 1998; Giddings 1984). In attempting to lay claim to this raced and gendered office, black women are rendered invisible by both the media and the public (Smooth 2006b). Black female presidential candidates are not well preserved in America's collective memory either. McClain, Carter, and Brady (2005) begin an article comparing the presidential candidacies of Shirley Chisholm and Carol Moseley Braun by noting that "some have forgotten, but most are unaware," of Chisholm's historic 1972 campaign. By our count, four black women have run presidential campaigns, though we suspect that few readers can spontaneously name them all.[7]

Steinem's essay further suggests that no woman, regardless of her race, "could have used Mr. Obama's public style." There is an element of truth in this proposition. Obama's charisma, rhetorical style, and even the cadence of his delivery recalled some of the most prominent black male orators in recent history. Drawing on a public style reserved exclusively for black men, what Marable (1998) calls black messianic leadership style, Obama's rock star-like allure may be off limits to women who must leave emotional appeals at the door in favor of studied demonstrations of knowledge and expertise to be taken seriously in presidential campaigns. Obama's sex may have advantaged him in other ways. Obama, not Clinton, was able to embody competitiveness and athleticism by playing basketball with soldiers from Fort Bragg, NC. Clinton, meanwhile, was derided for

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recounting childhood hunting trips and tossing back boilermakers in the lead-up to the Indiana primary (Canellos 2008). The point, of course, is not that either candidate was more or less strategic, but rather that Obama, by virtue of his gender, physically projects presidential authority in ways Clinton could not easily mimic.

Yet, Obama's male body in the face of Clinton's masculine-gendered campaign did not shield him from critiques that are typically leveled against female candidates. To be sure, women seeking the presidency walk a tightrope between showing toughness while remaining feminine, but men who compete for the nation's highest office must also negotiate masculinity. In this light, gender is malleable and independent of anatomy (Duerst-Lahti 2006; Hawkesworth 2005). As a result, not all men are equally masculine and some men who are not "masculine enough" may not be viewed as suitable for the presidency. Thus, in a curious turn of events, Clinton "wore the pants" in this nomination cycle, touting her bona fides as a fighter and running ads that questioned whether Obama was tough enough to withstand Republican scrutiny. Clinton's infamous "3 a.m. ad" relayed the not-so-subtle message that Obama was too inexperienced and that she alone possessed the necessary fortitude to protect the nation's [white] women and children.[8] Obama's campaign was also gendered feminine by pundits and party leaders who wondered publicly whether Obama had the "passion to succeed" or "had enough fight in him to win."[9] Ironically, Obama shifted the public discourse about his gendered fit for the presidency by forcefully disavowing his former pastor. Pundits characterized this move as decisive, a principled stand, and a demonstration that Obama could handle a crisis.

Harkening back to the exchange between white suffragist women and black abolitionists, Gloria Steinem's statement drew parallels between traditional male-dominated power structures and women's oppression by ignoring the reality of nested systems of oppression that restructure power and resources. The implication is that a black male candidate, by virtue of his maleness, is closer to popular perceptions of the male-gendered presidency than women of all races. What this argument fails to account for is how the interplay of race and gender restructures the black male presence, his mobility, and his command of power in certain spaces. Black men who would hold the presidency are perhaps benefited by their sex, but must navigate racial and gender stereotypes before becoming viable candidates.

Black men operate in an environment shaped by multiple systems of oppression and are viewed skeptically when asserting rights to power not derived in or primarily exercised over black communities. While black male leadership is the norm in black civil institutions, it is often perceived as out of place in other settings (Carby 1998). Womanist critiques of patriarchy have highlighted the suppression of women's voices in black leadership circles and the way in which it undermines black women's agency. Narrowing our gaze, momentarily, we look squarely at the predicament confronting the black male body seeking power in nontraditional [white] spaces. While the experience of race is not gender neutral, neither is the experience of gender race neutral (Higginbotham 1992). "Consequently," as Julia Jordan-Zachary (2007, 178) observes, "in a racialized society, patriarchy serves to oppress not only women of color differently from Euro-American women; it also differentiates men of color from Euro-American men."

Obama's biracial heritage, Ivy League pedigree, and international rather than Southern roots distinguish him from "homegrown" blacks in America's public imagination. Further, the fact that Obama presented none of the popular stereotypes of black masculinity—anger, aggression, danger/criminality—made him more palatable to white voters. This is one reason why Obama's connection to the "angry" Reverend Wright was so risky—it could potentially box him into the category of angry black male. Public questioning of Obama's capacity for anger and his willingness to fight underscores a dilemma facing would-be black leaders, especially men, who seek prestigious posts in white-majority contexts. White feminists such as Steinem take into account identity, traditional gender roles, and patriarchy that stratify power between men of all stripes and women, but fail to acknowledge the important shift in context between the acceptability of black male authority in the black community and the acceptability of that same power claim in white-dominated spaces. In a country where patriarchy is the norm, black men occupying seats of power as heads of households, businesses, schools, and churches is acceptable, even preferred. Such a "preference" for patriarchy is embedded in blaming black women heads of household for the litany of ills confronting poor black children and in legislative initiatives promoting marriage and fatherhood as solutions (Jordan-Zachary 2007).[10] Yet expectations for black male leadership do not seamlessly translate across racial contexts. For much of mainstream America, power is perceived as the province of white men and assertions of black male authority are viewed as problematic, threatening, and out of place. As Robert Gooding-Williams (1993, 4) notes, America's racist history dictates "a mode of perception that insists always and everywhere on seeing black bodies as dangerous bodies." This way of seeing presents a particular quandary for Obama who must at once appear powerful, but not overpowering in a body that is "constituted through fear . . . prior to any gesture, any raising of the hand" (Butler 1993, 18).

The 2008 primary season has uncovered other troubling cleavages in the evolving Democratic coalition. Blacks and Latinos, groups making up increasingly important shares of the Democratic base, have been played against each other. Clinton's apparent decision to construct an electoral coalition of Latinos, older white women, and working class whites while writing off black voters suggests a strategy we call, "transposing minorities." In such a scenario, the Democratic Party would replace blacks with Latinos in the party's electoral coalition rather than expand (see Jennings 1997; Sales and Bush 1997). As a result, the party could continue to sideline racial issues, while exhibiting prima facie inclusiveness with little accountability to minority concerns. This scenario, while viable for the Democratic Party, spells a dual loss for Latinos and blacks.

Having a member of one's own group command the enormous power of the presidency is, for some, the ultimate manifestation of full integration—though we do not want to overstate this claim. Mansbridge (1999) points out that while some rationales for descriptive representation satisfy tenets of democratic theory, having a descriptive representative in office does not satisfy requirements for accountability or responsiveness between voters and their representatives. Debates over degrees of oppression redirect critical attention from alleviating oppression across multiple marginalized groups and demonstrate how white privilege, especially white male privilege, is let off the hook in prevailing election narratives. With the ascendance of a black man and white woman as major party contenders, 2008 will remain a historic moment and an important achievement. However, failure to situate these candidacies in a larger political context of persistent and enduring racial and gender inequality will continue familiar patterns of exclusion. Once again, marginalized groups will be left out of the full political benefits of American citizenship.

Conclusion

The 2008 Obama campaign provides an opportunity to examine the trajectory of black politics in contemporary America. The effective use of technology to organize supporters and raise

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funds allowed the Obama camp to level the playing field in a way that would have been impossible just a decade ago. Thus, Obama was able to run a credible challenge to the long-established Clinton machine. For all of its historical significance, the Obama campaign represents both an extension of and a departure from traditional black presidential politics that has typically focused on black inclusion and incorporation into American governance, garnering concessions to black policy demands, improving black material conditions, and establishing the pursuit of presidential power as a right of all citizens. The question of whether an Obama administration would address any of these traditional expectations remains unanswered. Clearly, much is still to be learned from this historical moment. It is likely, however, that the issues highlighted in these pages represent a broad spectrum of themes currently being raised amongst scholars, in classrooms, and across kitchen tables. We hope that our observations will advance black politics scholarship and contribute to the development of grounded theories of race and gender in presidential politics.

We have examined the way in which the public personas crafted by black candidates seeking statewide and national office are shaped and curtailed by dominant norms and perceptions of black Americans. As an answer to these limitations, many black candidates have opted to run campaigns that avoid direct engagement with racial questions. Similarly, Obama has avoided direct racial appeals and played up his image as a race-transcending candidate. As urban politics scholars have demonstrated, deracialized campaigns may be successful and expedient political strategies, but they generally fall short of championing black community empowerment goals. The conundrum confronting black candidates, advocacy groups, and citizens is that the path to mainstream political inclusion is often in conflict with the path to black political empowerment. In concert with previous scholarship, we are doubtful that black candidates can simultaneously de-emphasize race and also engage in racial advocacy. How black politics will fare under an Obama administration is uncertain, but the need for independent black activism will not dissipate.

Regardless of the outcome of the general election, the question of identity politics will continue to inform American social and political life. This election has evoked group pride across numerous categories, but pride had been framed as more or less legitimate depending on the group. Thus, racial solidarity is seen as diminishing the legitimacy of black votes in a way that gender solidarity in support of a female candidate is not. This election has also unearthed old wounds from previous efforts at cross-identity coalition building. When joint efforts to thwart a common foe are replaced with competition for power and prestige, the political process can become more complicated and divisive. This result is especially true when a marginalized group or members of that group utilize scripts that tap into negative perceptions of another marginalized group to forward political objectives. The invocation of underlying antipathy towards certain marginalized groups by members of other marginalized groups may provide temporary gains, but at the high cost of buttressing dominant stereotypes and making future coalitions amongst minority groups more difficult to maintain. The intricacies of identity are clearly reflected in this election and the powerful influence of identity on all aspects of political processes suggests that race transcendence for any candidate may be impossible.

Notes

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1. Obama's story sharply contrasts the lived experiences of many blacks for whom realizing the American dream remains devastatingly elusive. Black unemployment levels are routinely twice that of the national average (Young 2004; McKinnon 2003). Half of black men with only a high school education are unemployed while nearly three-quarters of black male high school dropouts are jobless (Eckholm 2006).

2. In January 2008 CNN reported that Obama was favored by 28 % in the African American community. This represented a sea change from the fall when Clinton held a 24-point lead over Obama (www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/01/18/poll.2008/index.html). Ultimately, Obama received three quarters of the African American vote in South Carolina (http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/primaries/results/epolls/#SCDEM).

3. Most notably, civil rights veteran and Georgia representative John Lewis rescinded his early Clinton endorsement after his district overwhelmingly voted for Obama (Zeleny 2008).

4. Jackson-Lee was booed by Obama supporters at a Democratic Senate District Convention held in Houston weeks after the Texas primary (www.khou.com/topstories/stories/khou080329_tj_jacksonlee.11d275a3.html).

5. The successful courting of nontraditional donors by the Obama campaign cultivates fertile ground for blacks to generate independent financial support to unseat entrenched politicians who rebuff their district preferences.

6. Prior to the South Carolina primary, Clinton was reputed to be competitive with Obama for the black vote. After South Carolina, Clinton did not campaign in the Potomac primaries in Maryland; Washington, D.C.; and Virginia, choosing instead to focus her attention on the Pennsylvania primary occurring six weeks later.

7. According to the Center for American Women and Politics, four black women have run for president; they include Shirley Chisholm (1972), Leonora Fulani (1998, 1992), Carol Moseley Braun (2004), and Cynthia McKinney (2008) (see "Women Presidential and Vice Presidential Candidates: A Selected List" at www.cawp.rutgers.edu/FACTS/CanHistory/prescand.pdf).

8. While much of the public discussion of the ad focused on its suggestion that Obama was a weak candidate, many observers, particularly in the black community, reacted to the portrayal of a vulnerable white woman and child and the subtle question of whether Obama, a black man, could be trusted to protect them.

9. Obama, the most liberal senator in the 110th Congress according to the nonpartisan *National Journal*, ran a campaign with health care reform and opposition to the Iraq war as its central tenets, and pledged to end Washington gridlock by building coalitions across the aisle and practice an international diplomacy that included talking to America's enemies.

10. For an extensive discussion of how intersectionality is different than simple additive or interactive relationships see Ange-Marie Hancock 2007.

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