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An Untraditional Intersectional Analysis of the 2008 Election

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Most will agree that scholars of political science will examine the two-year cycle of this American presidential election for generations to come. The essays in this symposium are "first reads," and due to time and space constraints can only identify a handful of trends. Suffice it to say that Senator Hillary Clinton and Governor Sarah Palin's candidacies are a boon to women and politics scholars, offering a wide swath of research questions and data to mine. The use of gender as an analytical category (Hawkesworth 2006; Scott 1986) will enhance examinations of the vast difference in Clinton's and Palin's ideologies, candidacies, and gendered performances in a way that illuminates, rather than obscures, the ideological diversity among women in the United States (see Schreiber 2008). Yet the deep attention paid to Clinton and Palin has so far focused on gender despite the candidates' own allusions to race and class identities as complicating factors in their gendered self-presentations. To focus solely on their positions as female candidates obscures some important macro-level questions about the 2008 election as a watershed moment, whether the focus is on "18 million cracks in the glass ceiling" or the shift in target voters from soccer moms into hockey moms.

Mary Hawkesworth defines enactments of race-gender as “a political process that silences, stereotypes, enforces invisibility, excludes and challenges the epistemic authority” of her chosen case study, women of color in the United States Congress (2003, 529). In this essay, I revisit the racing-gendering process she outlines, expanding it in a more global way to less traditional target populations of intersectionality. Once we shift our attention, further opportunities for investigating the constructions of relational power emerge in ways that meet intersectional researchers’ goals of discursively deconstructing conceptual practices of power (Garcia Bedolla 2007, 238).

WHY INTERSECTIONALITY?

Quite logically, the lenses brought to investigations of the 2008 election will vary widely on the basis of the disciplinary and subfield specializations of the scholars themselves. While many of these approaches are quite helpful, I first want to distinguish among the questions that traditional women and politics scholarship might ask concerning this election, the questions that traditional black politics scholarship might ask, and even the questions that traditional intersectionality scholarship might answer. Such questions share two limitations that the following nontraditional intersectional analysis hopes to overcome.

First, these three categories of “traditional” subspecializations tend to focus on the content of identities in politics, rather than on the use of these categories as analytical concepts. For example, in analyzing the 2008 campaign, many voting-behavior specialists would frame a question in the way that recent surveys by Paul Sniderman have: Are whites willing to vote for a black candidate for president? What is the “black tax” on polling numbers for a candidate like Barack Obama? Here, “race” is simply a self-reported variable that reveals nothing other than the presumed race of Barack Obama and the self-reported race of the respondent. There is no interrogation of the power relations that constitute race as a category of political difference in the United States at either the institutional or individual level.

These traditional Americanist questions are certainly worthy questions, but they miss a number of key points, not the least of which, as scholars in this journal and elsewhere have long documented, is the role of sexism in campaigns involving female candidates (McLean 2003, 58). If

we simply “insert women and stir,” however, scholars interested in sex or gender as a falsely biological variable would focus primarily on the way in which Clinton and Palin are (were) “silenced and stereotyped,” with comparatively little deep analysis of the gender privilege amassed by Obama or John McCain. Important questions, to be sure, but what drove the outrage of many Clinton supporters is left uninterrogated: their perceptions of latent and overt sexism in the 2008 campaign and its signal about the consolidation of political power within the Democratic Party and the United States. To remedy this deeply problematic silence, the traditional women and politics literature turns our attention to the role of gender as a category of analysis and its impact on Hillary Clinton’s quest for the nomination and, more recently, its impact on the candidacy of Sarah Palin for vice president.

Women and politics scholars following an analytical categorical approach would likely agree that analyzing Barack Obama as a *gendered* candidate is just as important as analyzing Hillary Clinton as a *gendered* candidate — the difference being, of course, that Obama would be the gender-privileged candidate (relatively speaking), while Clinton is the gender-disadvantaged candidate (relatively speaking). Conducting the investigation in this way reveals invisible androcentric norms that benefit Obama, whether Clinton wins or loses primary after primary.

Most black politics analysts would simply change the word “gender” to “race” and flip the privilege in each of the two previous paragraphs. The popular discussion of the “Bradley effect” in the media and among mainstream Americanists would be shaped quite differently by black politics scholars, who have questioned not simply whether such an effect was present in 2008 but the strategies that Obama used to mute any vestiges of such a lingering effect. Can or must Obama deracialize himself in order to win? How will the African-American community hold Obama accountable for substantive, rather than symbolic, representation? Yet far too often in the race literature, Hillary Clinton’s white identity would be treated as simply a counterpoint: a foil to Obama’s black identity and again not interrogated very deeply. Most black politics scholars following an analytical categorical approach would therefore agree that we cannot simply ask the standard questions about Barack Obama as a racialized candidate pursuing “raceless” strategies or adopting universalistic policy positions, comparing him perhaps to Jesse Jackson in 1984 or 1988. We also must analyze Obama relationally to Hillary Clinton’s position as a race-privileged candidate.

Finally, since no major party candidate for the executive branch in this election is a woman of color, scholars of all specializations might erroneously conclude that an intersectional approach is unnecessary in this context. There is a quasi-fundamental attribution error present in a wide variety of scholarship that would conclude that an intersectional approach is not warranted because intersectionality research is solely applicable to people of one specific identity: women of color.¹ Thus, unless we want to study Michelle Obama, Cynthia McKinney, and Rosa Clemente's Green Party candidacy, how black women voted in the Democratic primary, or Latina support for Clinton versus Obama, we do not need an intersectional approach to study the 2008 campaign.²

There are two problems with this conclusion. First, leaving women of color as the only race-gendered political candidates is deeply problematic, as it avoids deconstructing the practices of categorical power. Contemporary intersectional scholarship features significant attention to the power relations between groups, which renders visible not simply difference as traditionally mobilized but invisible norms as well (Garcia Bedolla 2007, 234). Second, this knee-jerk conclusion is based on an erroneous sense of where intersectionality starts to intervene in the analysis. Instead of its intervening at the stage of case selection or data analysis, it should actually intervene at the stage of research question development.

As I noted in the introduction in the cases of Clinton and Palin, to ignore Obama's own references to class and gender as part of his racialized self-presentation risks missing important information about the power relations residing in the intersections. What is missing from the aforementioned traditional analyses is not simply the depth of categorical analysis but the breadth of interrogation among categories as well. Intersectional scholars would use race *and* gender as analytical categories applicable to both candidates in order to reveal a more complete picture of the power relations at work between Senators Clinton and Obama on the primary campaign trail. However, the mobilization of intersectionality as an analytical framework entails much more than the usage of multiple categories in any analysis of campaigns, elections, or candidates. An Obama–Clinton comparison speaks not simply to the

1. While research has started to expand beyond this population (see, e.g., White 2007), the perceived limitation and subsequent critique of intersectionality as a framework solely applicable to women of color has been falsely asserted on a wide scale (see, e.g., Nash 2008; Zack 2005).

2. In no way do I mean to suggest that studying Michelle Obama or women-of-color voters is in any way illegitimate for scholars in political science (see Junn 2007).

ways in which race and gender categories operate, but inflects how we should discuss and analyze a third category: their shared socioeconomic class status. Similarly, such scholars could use gender *and* class as analytical categories applicable to the power relations at work between Governor Palin and Senator Joe Biden on the general election campaign trail, as both a commentary on the categories themselves and as a fascinating study of how both categories reflect a contestation over whiteness. But often the claim of an intersectional approach ends there — with the use of multiple categories.

I want to contend that utilizing an intersectional analytical framework (see Hancock 2007; Hawkesworth 2006; McCall 2005) to interrogate the role of race and gender among the major party candidates of the 2008 presidential election will produce superior results in analyzing the complex macro- and micro-level dynamics of race and gender in the campaign, even as we focus on candidates who were not women of color. This essay, therefore, stays away from the *expected* first-order questions usually associated with intersectionality while making no claim that such standard questions are in any way illegitimate.

Intersectionality changes the first-order question that exposes not just invisible norms like maleness but whiteness as well. One way in which we can examine these constructions is to use the method of racing-gendering process tracing invoked by Mary Hawkesworth. She contends that “[r]acing-gendering involves the production of difference, political asymmetries, and social hierarchies that simultaneously create the dominant and the subordinate. To investigate racing-gendering, then, it is crucial to attend to specifics and interrelationships” (2003, 531). If we take a fully intersectional approach in order to analyze Clinton and Obama, we do not simply frame Obama as the only candidate who is racialized. As well, we do not simply frame Clinton as the only candidate who is gendered. What follows is a preliminary sketch of racing-gendering, equally applied to both candidates.

CLINTON AS A RACIALIZED CANDIDATE

Intersectional analysis and methods like racing-gendering expand what theorists consider as political agency because it attends to denaturalizing and interrogating invisible norms in a systematic way that also attends to categorical complexity. One interesting product of this deep attentiveness to multiple categories and their relationships is that it becomes

increasingly difficult to pinpoint any pure victims. In the context of the 2008 Democratic primary, one disturbing outcome of all the late-stage hand wringing regarding institutional sexism was a caricature of Senator Clinton as a second-wave feminist victim, with little space in which to frame herself as an agent of her own destiny.³ This caricature, largely out of Clinton's hands in the media but sanctioned by her campaign and publicly promoted by surrogates like Geraldine Ferraro, contradicts both the image most Americans have of the office of president and overshadows Clinton's own vast capabilities and qualifications for the presidency. The gendering part of the racing-gendering process appears to have simultaneously empowered and constrained Clinton, earning her steadfast support among certain populations, even as her chance to win the nomination dimmed.

While this Catch-22 is precisely the conundrum that rampant sexism leaves behind, we must acknowledge that her agency within this context in terms of her campaign surrogates is undisputed.⁴ From an intersectional perspective, attention to Clinton's attenuated personal political power (as one in charge of her own presidential campaign) based on her gender also interacts with Clinton's institutional power from a racial perspective. When race gets discussed, the mainstream media and many political scientists will in all likelihood conduct a post-mortem on the Clinton campaign by focusing on her racialized comments about Martin Luther King or former President Bill Clinton's comparison between Obama and Jesse Jackson in South Carolina, which again foregrounds Obama's blackness without concomitantly foregrounding Clinton's racial privilege. The racing-gendering process's attentiveness to detail and power interrelationships places many more racial aspects of Clinton's presidency, together with gender, at the center of any analysis of her campaign.

Consider, for example Clinton's own statement to *USA Today* in May 2008:

"I have a much broader base to build a winning coalition on," she said. . . . As evidence, Clinton cited an Associated Press article "that found how Senator

3. This "victimology" approach has been castigated by antifeminist frames of Concerned Women of America (CWA) and the Independent Women's Forum (IWF) (see Schreiber 2008).

4. By this I mean that Ferraro and others discussing sexism would not have continued to do so if Senator Clinton had made it clear that it was unacceptable and harmful to the campaign. I do not mean to imply that Clinton *should* have deemed such talk unacceptable; I am simply pointing out she had the power to do so.

Obama's support among working, hard-working Americans, white Americans, is weakening again, and how whites in both states who had not completed college were supporting me. There's a pattern emerging here," she said.

While the mainstream media considered this a gaffe, such a statement fits the definition of a "gaffe" because she should not have said it, not because it was false. In an attempt to position herself as the superior candidate, Clinton herself acknowledged a racing-gendering process that claimed that part of her white vote was undeserved support, based on her race rather than on her qualifications. To recognize one's privilege, as Clinton did inadvertently here, is an uncomfortable, troubling form of agency, but it is still agency nevertheless. Thus, the political construction of Clinton as pure victim presents an incomplete picture of the candidate, as well as of the political context.

OBAMA AS A GENDERED CANDIDATE

Using the race-gendering method also reshapes how we analyze Barack Obama's campaign for the nomination. Most political scientists, pundits, and citizens have focused on Obama as a racialized candidate, whether as an African American, a biracial citizen, or a "postracial" human being. The unfamiliarity of Obama's story in presidential contests, especially when conflated with viral Internet rumors linking his middle name, Hussein, to allegedly covert membership in the Muslim faith, has sparked a wide level of interest and often outrage among scholars and lay people alike. In a manner quite similar to the Clinton campaign's gender challenge, the Obama campaign's approach to dealing with race and the racial aspects of a rumored Muslim faith are a mix of interactions between the racing-gendering process that occurs through institutional norms and practices and the decisions of the candidate himself. His campaign's fight against viral Internet hoaxes about his place of birth, religious faith, and racial ancestry was, like Clinton's struggle with gender, part of the Catch-22 that racism allows to flourish. Obama needed to get the facts out: Just as there was sexism to be revealed and repudiated surrounding Hillary Clinton's campaign, there were racist lies to be disputed and debunked surrounding the Obama campaign. Yet the way in which the campaign handled the task often presented Obama as someone who was just as afraid of Muslims as the opponents who launched

the e-mails.⁵ This analysis recognizes within-group complexity in a way that disturbs the black–white paradigm characteristic of so much mainstream race-politics punditry.

As with Clinton, however, we must also center gender. One particular example stands out in a way that clearly reveals Obama's male privilege and agency. In late April 2008, he very publicly played an early morning game of pick-up basketball with members of the University of North Carolina Tar Heels men's basketball team, including 2007–8 Player of the Year Tyler Hansbrough.⁶ Athletic activity has long been part of the media's coverage of presidents; and Obama conducted a three-on-three basketball game in Kokomo, Indiana, during that same week. Unsurprisingly, these media opportunities occurred immediately prior to the Indiana and North Carolina primaries on May 6, 2008. Women supporters of Hillary Clinton saw Obama's usage of sports metaphors in battleground states and these public basketball games as a way to solidify his image as a male politician among males who would otherwise vote for Hillary if she were not a woman. Just as Hillary got her share of undeserved white votes, so too did Obama gain a share of undeserved male votes.⁷

At the same time we cannot divorce the image of Obama, who would be the country's first African-American president, from the public identity of black male college and professional athletes. Such black men, whether castigated or celebrated in our society, represent a familiar black male public identity throughout all sectors of mainstream America. A black male president who plays basketball with the most accomplished athletes in the sport is that much more familiar than a black president with a strange name, of unfamiliar lineage, and possibly practicing an "un-American" religious faith.

Nevertheless, Obama's ability to emulate the black male elite athlete and to "talk sports" with the guys is structurally available to him, not because all men love sports and all women do not know about them but because of the gender privilege he enjoys as a male in a sports-oriented, patriarchal society.

5. The campaign's controversial relocation of Muslim female supporters out of television cameras' line of sight was just one way in which the agency present among subordinate group members requires us to hold Obama and his staff accountable, even as we recognize the confounding demands that racism placed upon him as a presidential candidate.

6. Obama also played a public game in basketball-crazy Indiana, with the WNBA's Indiana Fever stars Alison Bales and Tamika Catchings (who served as referee).

7. Here I am focusing on these votes as "undeserved" because they serve to reinforce existing hierarchical power relationships. So-called undeserved female support of Clinton and undeserved African-American support of Obama does not fundamentally reshape structures of political stratification.

Despite its relationship to race as constructed here, Obama exercised his agency and privilege in embracing such an image. As we saw in the racing-gendering of Hillary Clinton, the picture of Obama's candidacy is far more complicated than a simple racial interrogation suggests.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE RACING-GENDERING METHOD

To summarize, this essay has attempted to revisit the racing-gendering strategy of earlier intersectional work and apply it to a new target population – the final two 2008 Democratic presidential candidates. This analysis of Barack Obama's and Hillary Clinton's complicated positions as both privileged and subordinated reveals that Hawkesworth's racing-gendering strategy gives both further detail and more incisive avenues for interpretation. Critically, however, applying the strategy to a different set of case studies may impinge upon the definition of the racing-gendering process first identified as afflicting congresswomen of color. Most importantly, the foregoing analysis revealed that Hawkesworth's original and negative process of silencing, stereotyping, rendering invisible, and excluding may need to be complicated. Specifically, based on these interrogations of Obama and Clinton, further attention to the role of agency and privilege across multiple categories of analysis may be warranted.

Although the timing and structure of this forum does not permit rigorous standardized empirical analysis of these initial assertions, testable hypotheses can emerge. For example, we could test whether Obama's "having game" in fact solidified his support among male Democratic voters of all races in the primaries, based on their familiarity and comfort with the cultural narrative of the black male athlete. This question fits comfortably within a women and politics or black politics field of study. Scholars seeking to adopt intersectionality as an analytical framework, however, should exercise caution in developing research projects in order to avoid interjecting intersectionality at the wrong stage of project development. Changing the first-order question, which precedes sample or case selection, should guide the testing of this or any other hypothesis generated from the racing-gendering election analysis discussed here.

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Making Room for Women of Color: Race and Gender Categories in the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election

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Race and gender have never been more visible on the national political stage than during the 2008 U.S. presidential election, particularly during the months when Democratic Party rivals Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama battled in the party's state nomination caucuses and primaries. Clinton stood in for gender, representing all women, while Obama took his place in the category of race, standing in for all people of color. The success of these candidates and the addition of Sarah Palin as vice presidential nominee on the Republican ticket was a source of pride for many women and minority Americans. The "default" category for presidential candidates — the white male — had finally been displaced from the top of the ticket on the Democratic side and from the second in command for the Republicans.