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A Vote of Allegiance?

In the Obama-Clinton Battle, Race & Gender Pose
Two Great Divides for Black Women

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Woman has an ocean of wrongs too deep for any plummet, and the Negro, too, has an ocean of wrongs that cannot be fathomed. There are two great oceans; in the one is the black man, and in the other is the woman. . . . I will be thankful in my soul if any body can get out of the terrible pit."

-- Lucy Stone, 19th-century abolitionist and suffragist, after women were excluded from the 15th Amendment, which gave black men the right to vote.

The "isms" have once again been pitted against each other. Sexism or racism -- which ism is deepest? All things being equal, should a woman or a black man be lifted to the presidency? Which "first" is the imperative first?

The admonitions of white feminists urging black women to vote gender over race have cracked open a scab, a festering sore, that had crusted over the history of this country's competing isms. A scab that covered the lingering tension between some white feminists and some black women, with their dual historic burden of race and gender. It is black women, after all, who have faced both sexism and racism in their lives.

In the race for the Democratic presidential nomination, which ism goes first? Some women fear the question, say it is divisive, explosive, should never be asked. But it has been asked -- in the recent writings of feminists including [Gloria Steinem](#) and Robin Morgan. The question is ripe, reeling under the surface, discussed with muffled outrage by black women grown weary of white feminists seeming to tell them what to do.

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Alice Thomas, who is black, is thinking about the question, talking about the campaign, about Sens. [Barack Obama](#) and [Hillary Clinton](#). About the recent comments by [Geraldine Ferraro](#) and the exhortations of some feminist leaders.

A law professor at Howard University's School of Law, Thomas lives in Northwest Washington, in an upper-middle-class, racially mixed neighborhood with grand houses and big trees that blow with the sway of affluence. Most of the prominent white feminists are affluent, too. But their language, their



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mission, says Thomas, do not resonate.

"I never felt a kinship with white feminists. There never was a time when I felt something familiar when I heard Gloria Steinem," she says. "I always thought these same women went home and slept with those men who were discriminating against me. I wanted to say, 'Could you talk to him on the pillow tonight?'"

"I felt they were women who had the luxury of taking on battles a little at a time. . . . With the presidential election, NOW has taken a position against Barack Obama in favor of Hillary, making that a feminist stand. To take a position opposite Barack is to take a position opposite my family and our community."

She says her grade-school son looks at the Obama campaign with wide eyes and now believes he could grow up to be president. The white feminists, she says, have had the opportunity to have their boys dream that dream realistically for decades.

Seated at a restaurant, she looks out onto Connecticut Avenue. Black and white people walk by. The day is an awful shade of gray.

"I'm not going to stand against him simply because there is a woman on the other side. It means so much more for me if Barack wins than if Hillary wins. I don't pick Hillary because she is a woman and I am a woman. I don't pick Barack because he is black and I am black. I pick Barack because he is a man of substance."

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Gender 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](#).

-- Gloria Steinem

Steinem's recent op-ed piece in the [New York Times](#) infuriated many black people. She argued that black men were given the right to vote before women, but failed to mention the lynchings that made it potentially fatal to take up that right.

"The thing that ends up being curious to me is what people like Gloria Steinem advocate," says Lisa Crooms, a black woman who is director of the Constitutional Law Center at Howard University School of Law.

"They should know better," she says of the white feminists. "That is the most disheartening thing for me: 'We white women do this and you black women don't get it.' I thought folks had learned those lessons in intro to women's studies courses. . . . I thought it was something white women got, but clearly they didn't. Something didn't translate."

Black women say the pangs they feel in this debate of the competing isms have been sharpened as the campaign rhetoric has intensified.

"White feminists reduce everything to their cultural experience," says Arica Coleman, 46, a professor of black American studies at the [University of Delaware](#). "We had a different battle. We are fighting a war on two fronts, being both female and being black. I know when I walk into any office or anywhere,

people see my skin color first and automatically make assumptions."

"I wish people would stick to the issues, and the ultra-feminists would stop crying wolf because their girl is not winning," Coleman says. "Obama is not crying racism."

NOW President Kim Gandy says the lines drawn between sexism and racism and white women and black women are not that clear. "I think people are still thinking about racism and sexism because they still exist," she says. "I wouldn't call it a dichotomy. The camps are quite diverse. There are African American women who support Hillary Clinton and white women who support Barack Obama. The campaigns crossed those racial and gender lines."

To the question of which ism has the greater burden to overcome, Gandy says, "I say that is unknowable. Having never experienced racism, I couldn't express an opinion about that." She says the greater burden depends on experience and perspective. "To suggest there is a competition between racism and sexism is delightful to people who would see us divided from each other," she says. "Until we as a country recognize the intersection of those isms and the terrible damage they do, we will not be as great as we could be as a nation."

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Never has a campaign given voters who were not white men such power to participate in the "politics of identity." Blogs have exploded with people of all identities explaining why they favor one Democratic candidate over the other. Black women have been particular targets, with bloggers attacking them for deciding that voting for a black candidate was more important than voting for a woman.

And some black women have asked how they split their identities. Are they black first or women first? To which group do they pledge allegiance? Does the term feminist apply only to white women? Can a woman be black and feminist at the same time, even if she hardly understood Betty Friedan's 1963 feminist classic, "The Feminine Mystique," which asked the bored housewife's question: "Is this all?"

[Avis](#) Jones-DeWeever, director of research at the National Council of Negro Women, says the answer lies in perspective. "That was Betty Friedan's truth. That was her experience of feeling bound by the limitations of being a housewife. That was not the typical truth for the black woman."

Jones-DeWeever says many black women worked outside the home out of necessity, a fact that seemed to be ignored by arguments made at the height of the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s.

"You had a push by white women to get out in the workforce. That is fundamentally a different experience," Jones-DeWeever says. "Black women were always in the workforce. Even if part of that workforce was the work of raising white women's children. Our perspectives are different. There is the feeling that some second-wave feminists view life through a binary perspective; the male and female being the only line of division in their society."

The lines are more complex for women of color. "Personally, for me, I feel it cuts both ways," Jones-DeWeever continues. "In my experience, if I was to weigh the two, I would say race has had a greater impact on issues in my life. I am black. Both of my parents were educated in segregated schools in [Virginia](#). . . . There was a lot of brouhaha about the Rev. [Jeremiah] Wright's statements in the news. He was saying Hillary was never called the N-word. I was first called the N-word in fourth grade and the last time I was called the N-word was in graduate school."

Race cuts even deeper now. Jones-DeWeever is raising two sons, 4 and 11. Her personal choice for president is Obama. "I worry about them as young black men driving a car," she says. "What will happen when they get pulled over by the police? I am realistic about what I need to teach them about how to conduct themselves in that situation. Those are issues most white women and white mothers don't have to be concerned about, life and death issues that will impact their children."

Latifa Lyles, vice president of membership of NOW, says sexism is a huge problem in the country, a learned behavior that doesn't seem to provoke as much outrage. "I am an African American woman," Lyles says. "There is not a day when I don't think of both."

Overt racism is less prominent, she says. "In my experience, I am more likely to see some kind of sexist incident than a racist incident. Because of the prevalence, people become more desensitized to it. If someone says something more overtly racist, I would have a much stronger reaction to it because I'm not used to hearing overtly racist comments."

Lani Guinier, a professor at [Harvard's Law School](#), says white women and black women have had different relationships to power. White women, she says, have had a greater access to it.: "They were sleeping with power. Even though they were disadvantaged in terms of access to conventional opportunities to their mates, they were also in an intimate relationship with power."

Guinier, who is black, was once nominated as assistant attorney general for civil rights in the Clinton administration, but her name was withdrawn after controversy erupted over her writings on affirmative action. "For black women, power was not represented by their mate or by their father or by their uncle, which is not to say -- I am by no means excusing sexism within the black community or the fact there is violence against women," Guinier says. "It extends beyond any particular identity. I am trying to make this larger point that quote-unquote the man had a different footprint in the black community than in the white community."

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In her book "Ain't I a Woman," black feminist bell hooks says there is a fragile bond between white and black women's rights advocates. And that bond has been broken again during this presidential campaign, some women say, as it was during the first women's rights movement in the late 1800s, during the second wave of women's rights in the 1960s and '70s, and then during the "mommy wars" that still rage today.

"There are a fair number of women of color who would consider themselves to be feminists who have no time and interest in struggling with white women anymore," Crooms says. "Some people come from the view that if there is truly a difference between what is offered as mainstream white feminism and black feminism, black feminists are trying to figure out how we as black people can move forward as a community. We are not interested in fanning the flames between black women and black men. . . . Racism and sexism impact people differently. . . . You have race injuries. You have sexism injuries. Pick between the two? No, it's not like that."

No one profits when oppressed people are split against each other, says Patricia J. Williams, author, columnist and professor of law at [Columbia University](#). She argues there is often an ideological agenda involved when people claim that racism is no longer a major force in this country.

That is what Ferraro's recent comments seemed to imply, that race had become an advantage: "If Obama was a white man, he would not be in this position. And if he was a woman. . . . he would not be in this

position," Ferraro said.

Says Williams, who is black: "One ubiquitous subtext of the black-man-trumps-white-woman calculus is that it's easier to be a black man than it is to be a white woman or, even more reductively, that sexism is worse than racism. . . . That in turn fuels the not-so-coded diminishment asserting that Obama is getting 'preferential' treatment in the media; that he's simultaneously 'entitled' and 'elite' yet 'unqualified' and 'not ready.' A lot of this debate as it is currently framed is a product of a very segregated society."

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Robin Morgan, an author and founder of the Women's Media Center, recently wrote an essay titled "Goodbye to All That (#2)," a reprise of her 1970 denunciation of sexism. In her latest manifesto, published online last month, she argued that she would vote for Clinton because of the historical importance of overcoming sexism.

"I was celebrating the pivotal power at last focused on African American women deciding on which of two candidates to bestow their vote -- until a number of Hillary-supporting black feminists told me they're being called 'race traitors,' " she wrote. "So goodbye to conversations about this nation's deepest scar -- slavery --which fail to acknowledge that labor- and sexual-slavery exist today in the U.S. and elsewhere on this planet, and the majority of those enslaved are women."

Morgan, who is white, received a flood of reaction, from women who thanked her for expressing what they needed to hear, from younger women saying they were tired of older feminists shoving the movement down their throats, from a black man who said he would be overjoyed to see a black family in the White House.

"I certainly won't begrudge a woman's desire to want to see a woman in the White House and basing, at least in some measure, her choice on such a possible milestone of achievement," he wrote in an online response. "What I take absolute exception to in this article by Mrs. Morgan however is the need to run down Obama for sake of supporting Hillary."

Morgan says she was not trying to run Obama down but trying to make a point about lingering sexism. She says she "cut her political eyeteeth in the civil rights movement." She agrees that racism is a major wound in this country's history and still is today. The society's consciousness about racism is nowhere near where it should be, but it is higher than it is about sexism, she asserts.

"Sexism is not as high as yet," Morgan says. "It is still there. It is still pervasive. It is so pervasive, sometimes you can't see it standing out from the background.

"Anything that can be interpreted as racist in the campaign is leapt upon and should be," Morgan says. "Stuff that is blatantly sexist is not leapt upon. It's often ignored, trivialized and laughed away."

Only now has it been highlighted after "women said, 'Excuse me!' " Morgan says the attacks on Clinton have ranged from trivialization to outright venom. "The Hillary Clinton nutcracker doll being sold in airports. They would not dare do that with a Stepin Fetchit doll in the image of Senator Obama. And they shouldn't do that and there would be national outrage, and there should be national outrage."

Still, it is never a good idea to compare human suffering, Morgan says. "The only people in a position to say which bigotry they suffered worst from would be African American women. Some say they have suffered more from racism. And others, like Shirley Chisholm, said they have suffered more from

sexism. That is not for me as a European American woman to say."

Mary Frances Berry remembers those heated discussions of the 1970s, when Chisholm became the first black woman to run for president.

"Shirley Chisholm and I had long conversations about whether sexism or racism is a bigger barrier," says Berry, former chairwoman of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. "She said to me when she was running for president she found out how much sexism was a barrier. The reaction of men to the fact she was going to run for president almost floored her. Other black politicians couldn't understand why she thought she could run for president. That campaign didn't go anywhere."

But Berry says it's dangerous to raise questions pitting sexism against racism. "I think anytime people who have been in subordinated groups start debating about whose discrimination is the worst is a problem," she says. "What they should do is reconcile the differences. Everybody has had something happen in their history. That's why it's called subordination."

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