

Representations of Race and Gender in Mainstream Media Coverage of the 2008 Democratic Primary

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Published online: 16 December 2008
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Abstract This paper presents a critical examination of the representations and code words for race and gender used in coverage of the Democratic primary between January 2008 and June 9, 2008. This analysis included all coverage in the New York Times and two cable television news channels (CNN, MSNBC). With an election pitting a black man against a white woman, media has been forced to go behind the colorblind curtain that typically ignores all but the most obvious references to race. Evidence illustrates how the mainstream media, in creating a story that resonates with commonsense understandings of race, gender and power, reworks representations of the candidates in a way that does not challenge white, masculine hegemony.

Keywords Obama · Media representations · Campaign 2008 coverage · Hegemony · Masculinity

Introduction

All postmodern events are subject to mediation; none more so than those which both capture the attention of the media and pivot the public's attention on some quote or image which is transformed into a Rorschach for larger cultural conflicts. These pivotal quotes or images become media events (Fiske 1996). Whether it was the O.J. Simpson trial, the Jon Bennet murder or the 2008 Democratic primary, the media interacts with the audience in serving up fodder for discussions of larger strains in the culture. These media events are, by nature, creating crosscurrents and flows of larger social ebbs.

To make sense of the world is to exert power over it, and to circulate that sense socially is to exert power over those who use that sense as a way of coping with their daily lives. (Fiske 1996:3)

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Using the cultural studies perspective, this paper situates the media narratives in the coverage of the Democratic primary 2008 as important manifestations of ideology—particularly the dominant group’s preferred color blind ideology which forms the scaffold for continuing racial inequality—and a counter ideology that is racially cognizant challenging the existing racial hierarchies and the frameworks that support a racialized social structure. Coverage of the campaign can be seen as competing racial projects (Hall 1997; Omi and Winant 1994). How media outlets discuss or avoid discussions of race tell us something important about how the media comes to represent race in the social world they help shape. The argument I make is that the mainstream media, in seeking to comfort its dominant white audience, engages in colorblind tactics designed to soothe those who benefit from the status quo while simultaneously trying to appear sensitive and objective to the growing audience of those who are cognizant of the racial hierarchy and unequal access to power, prestige, privilege and property. In the analysis, I identify three themes that pervade the coverage of the race between a white woman and Black man for the nomination. These three themes are: (1) Reinforcing Patriarchy: Coverage of Clinton as a Mythical Man; (2) Camouflaging Blackness by Gendered Sights: the Emasculation of Barack Obama; and (3) Re-centering Normative Whiteness: Channeling the Black Other.

Background

One media event which framed the analysis of mainstream media coverage was the Saturday Night Live skit, “B*tch is the New Black.” Performed in the midst of the Democratic primary runoffs, the skit poked fun at the derogatory term for women (bitch) while at the same time praising Hillary Clinton and other so-labeled women as the ones “who get things done.” Speculating on why Clinton was struggling in the primary elections, the skit theorized that:

... it’s because people think Hillary is a ‘bitch.’ Let me say something about that, Tina Fey went on. She is [a bitch]. And so am I. And so is she—pointing to her co-anchor. You know what, bitches get stuff done. That’s why Catholic schools use nuns as teachers and not priests. Those nuns are mean old clams and they sleep on cots and they’re allowed to hit you. And at the end of the school year you *hated those bitches* but you knew the capital of Vermont. So, I’m saying it’s not too late Texas and Ohio, bitch is the new black! (Fey 2008)

This skit was a media event in that it was referred to and re-played by all major cable networks for more than a week and was viewed over a million times on YouTube. It illustrates one pervasive theme, or motif, in the media coverage of the race between a white woman and a Black man for the Democratic Party nomination. It makes the facile assertion that being a strong white woman is as much, if not more, an impediment to likeability as being Black in America. Appropriating and inverting a derogatory term as a compliment, the performance operates on two levels that subsume themes that dominated media coverage of the primary: it asserts unabashedly that being a strong woman is equivalent to being Black in this society in terms of denigration and it implies that being described in this derogatory fashion is cool.

In the same way hip-hop and some academics have sought to appropriate the former term “n***er” with an insider cool status, this skit attempts to re-appropriate “b*tch” as an affectionate term for a maligned group. In so doing, it attempts to reassert white supremacy and the new racism into the popular vernacular.

Purpose of the Study

This study examined selected media events during democratic presidential campaign as reported by the mainstream print media (New York Times; Washington Post), cable networks (CNN; MSNBC). The examination focused on the deployment of representations and use of code words for race and gender in those campaign occurrences which were transformed into media events. Borrowing from Fiske, “media events” serve as public arenas or spectacles which engage people in political discussions and debates. Accordingly, occurrences become “media events” only when they circulate deeply contested currents of race, class, gender and sexuality that grab the interest of significant portion of the population.

What campaign media events were selected from the daily grind of trivial campaign trail rhetoric as feature fodder for discussion by pundits and opinion pieces? How were those “stories” mediated and circulated by these different media venues? What (mis)understandings of intersections of race and gender were revealed by the various sites? What racial projects are revealed in the on-going coverage of six months of highly viewed news?

By capturing and interpreting the news coverage, this research enhanced the existing body of scholarly literature on cultural representations of race and gender. Such manifestations of culture can reveal important findings about racial rules, the persistence of racial boundaries and the promotion of invisible mechanisms to keep boundaries intact that separate groups. The new racism hides behind a color blind ideology which serves to support the existing racial hierarchies (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Ferber 2007).

Gender is an essential prop of white supremacy. This is especially true in the social construction of white femininity, with its emphasis on purity and racial purity that forms the ideological linchpin for white supremacy. Although sociological literature accepts that both gender and race are socially constructed and that race is gendered, the media and also the public talk of race and gender as separate, not intersecting, entities.

Conceptual Framework

In addition, these mediated stories, served up and circulated by the media illustrate how the gendered nature of whiteness is an important but under researched dynamic of power. By gaining access to the process by which invisible normative whiteness persists against all odds, we can begin to dismantle it. Race is one fundamental dimension that both structures society and shapes cultural meanings. Structural and cultural interactions, in turn, shape the ever-evolving hierarchies of power, privilege and prestige. In *Racial Formations in the United States*, Michael Omi and Howard Winant situate race theory in socio-historical terms by illustrating that race is “...a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies” (Omi and Winant 1994; 55). Omi and Winant’s racial

formation theory provides the framework for understanding how important cultural representations can be in reframing race as a matter of both identity and injustice.

How things are represented and the ‘machineries’ and regimes of representation in a culture do play a constitutive, and not merely a reflexive, after the event, role. This gives questions of culture and ideology, and the scenarios of representation—subjectivity, identity, politic—a formative, not merely an expressive place in the constitution of social and political life (Hall 1997).

Race is a concept, socially created and negotiated, that changes in different historical epochs and in different cultures (Haney Lopez 1996, Lipsitz 1998). The Omi and Winant concept of racial formations, “the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed” (Omi and Winant 1994; 55) is based in Gramsci’s concept of hegemony.

Hegemony, as the link between social structure and culture, is the engine that not only drives changing racial formations, but creates political shifts and results in the gaining, using or losing of power. Hegemony is the process that links structure and culture; it also resolves states of instability and provides the mechanism for social change. According to Gramsci, hegemony is a combination of both coercion and consent. Gramsci differentiates ideology as a system of ideas worked out by intellectuals or institutions from ideology as a historically organic process necessary for any given social formation; ideologies are embodied in the practices of individuals, through their way of knowing the world as well as through institutions.

Omi and Winant’s racial formation process “occur through a linkage between structure and representation. Racial projects do the ideological ‘work’ of making the link” (Omi and Winant 1994: 56). They offer this definition which is useful to the present research:

A racial project is simultaneously an interpretation, representation or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines. Racial projects connect what race *means* in a particular discursive practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially *organized*, based on meanings. (Omi and Winant 1994: 56)

The main argument I present is that the stories told about race and gender in coverage of the race to power and the White House, are important racial projects. As discussed in the Findings section, the themes I identified in the coverage serve to reinforce the existing racial order.

Methods

Between January 2008 and June 9, 2008 I read every issue of three major newspapers for articles and opinion pieces on the Democratic primary race: New York Times, Wall Street Journal and the Washington Post. In addition, I visited Huffingtonpost.com and Jackandjillpolitics.com several times a day for coverage of the primary and I watched the following on weekdays: CNN (*Situation Room*) Fox News (Bill O’Reilly), MSNBC (*Hardball* and *Countdown*).

I kept three sets of files: master files, theme files and interpretive files. I preserved each single spaced transcript of media events in a master file. I read each transcript many times and coded each according to the themes identified in the introduction to the study. I created thematic data files which had long sections of pertinent quotes from several different interviews. In addition I kept excerpts of quotes in interpretive files when I found passages that did not seem to “fit” the themes. Sometimes media coverage would focus on something that stuck with me for unknown reasons. How or why it was either significant or important was unclear. In those instances, I selected that section of the file and wrote memos about how I felt, what troubled me about the comment and how it seemed out of place, inconsistent, contradictory or incomprehensible. In some cases, it took several weeks before aspects of these interpretive files took shape. From these interpretive files, the gender theme and the white indignation coalesced. I have selected the most oft referenced quotations.

Findings

There were four separate but related themes that emerged in the coverage of the two historic candidates. This paper explores three that deploy race and gender.

Reinforcing Patriarchy: The Coverage of Hillary Clinton as a Mythical Man

The social construction of white femininity has required white women to be demur, deferential and delicate to warrant the protection and support of their white fathers and husbands (Blee 1991; Brown 1996; Cott 2000; Gilmore 1996). In making herself a candidate for the highest office in the land, Hillary Clinton had to push back on that particular construction of femininity or that construction of gendered whiteness in order to be taken as a serious contender. The presentation of self she engaged as well as the public face constructed by the media positioned Clinton as the candidate best able to protect America, best prepared to fight for Americans and best qualified to be Commander in Chief.

Against this historical backdrop of gender formation, the former First Lady assumed postures that usually defied any stereotypes about weak women. In the beginning of the campaign to demonstrate her ability to lead the country Clinton marked herself not only as a strong woman, albeit one occupying the unmarked category of white, with race rendered invisible. In response, the press consistently portrayed Hillary Clinton as a mythical man—attributing to her those characteristics of hegemonic masculinity: tough, self-sufficient, stoic (Kimmel 2008; Messner). Prior to the election, she had voted in favor of the Iraq war—some cynically viewed the vote as a way to soften the criticism against her weakness as a woman.

Despite her macho gender performance, her supporters from early on in the primary cast her as a victim nonetheless. Gloria Steinem, in an oft-discussed and referenced opinion piece:

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. This country is way down the list of countries electing women and, according to one study, it polarizes gender roles more than the average democracy.

That's why the Iowa primary was following our historical pattern of making change. Black men were given the vote a half-century before women of any race were allowed to mark a ballot, and generally have ascended to positions of power, from the military to the boardroom, before any women (with the possible exception of obedient family members in the latter). (Steinum 2008)

While her supporters often decried sexist treatment by the press, the first woman Presidential contender repeatedly performed hegemonic masculinity while failing to challenge white privilege. Speaking of her performances in the debates, most commentators echoed this assessment:

Clinton had sounded like a traditional executive, as someone who gathers the experts, forges a policy, fights the opposition, bears the burdens of power, negotiates the deal and, in crisis, makes the decision at 3 o'clock in the morning. (Brooks 2008)

Cable news, and to a lesser degree, the print media commented endlessly about her trademark pantsuit; one of the more kind comments: "In Iowa, her national anthem may have been off-key, but her look wasn't. It was an attractive mirror of her political message: man-tailored with a dash of pink femininity" (Matthews 2008a).

Using sports analogies, the candidate took the opportunity in Pennsylvania to give a speech in the same site as the famous speech by Sylvester Stallone in the film, *Rocky*. Presenting herself as the underdog in a boxing match, Clinton invoked the fighter metaphor that the media repeated for weeks: "tough" (Buchanan 2008); "the comeback kid" (Matthews 2008b); "down but not out" (Robinson 2008) etc.

Gov. Mike Easley (D, NC) said Clinton is so determined "She makes Rocky Balboa look like a pansy" (MSNBC: 04/29/08). A few days later, as a union leader introduced Clinton on the dais behind him, the President of the steelworkers local, 6787, stated the U.S. needed a leader "that has testicular fortitude, that's exactly right and that leader is Hillary" (Gibson 2008). There was no outcry from her campaign or surrogates on these attempts to masculinize the candidate. In fact, Clinton surrogate James Carville exaggerated the metaphor while speaking to *Newsweek* on a live MSNBC broadcast; referring to a comparison between Hillary Clinton and Obama, the campaign surrogate quipped: "If she gave him one of her cojones, they'd both have two"(Carville 2008).

The media meanwhile mused how a Yale graduate had repositioned herself as the hard-scrap fighter; typical is this quote from Maureen Dowd:

She showed again with her squeaker win in Indiana that for many white working-class men, she is The Man—more tenacious and less concerned with the judgments of the tony set, economists and editorial writers. Talking up guns, going to the Auto Racing Hall of Fame, speaking from the back of pickup trucks and doing shots of populism with a cynicism chaser, Hillary emerged from a lifetime of government limos to bask as queen of the blue-collar prom. (Dowd 2008a)

Camouflaging Blackness by Attacking Gender: The Emasculation of Barack Obama

After the press and pundits settled during Fall 2007 on the debate about whether Barack Obama was "black enough" (they determined he was Black using both the

historic rule of hypo-decent and some arbitrary cultural litmus test), their next project was to find a category which he could occupy that fit “commonsense” for the audience. Defying the most persistent stereotypes about black men, and chary of coming too close to a discussion of race, the press settled on the project of constructing Obama as less than a real man. For decades, the white imagination has been colonized with images of Black masculinity that have circulated as stereotypes: the Black man is depicted as hypersexual, violent, ignorant and brutish (Hunt 1999; Ferber 2007). For centuries, the black man has been socially constructed with “their muscles and their penises as their most important sites” (Collins 2005:57).

Early in the race, with the media struggling on how to categorize Obama without raising the specter of racial stereotypes, a project emerged to diminish him by frontal attacks on his perceived lack of masculinity. In fact, this diminishment became a project. At every opportunity Obama was painted not only as the antithetical persona to the Black buck stereotype, but as a poor substitute for the hegemonic masculinity that has been preferred by the public in selecting a candidate for the Oval Office. “Obama is the more emotionally delicate candidate, and the one who has the more feminine consensus management style, and the not-blinded-by-testosterone ability to object to a phony war” (Dowd 2008a). As commentators on the cable networks discussed his performance in the Super Tuesday February primaries, they marveled not at how an outsider was racking up delegate counts, but rather at “why can’t he deliver the knock-out punch” (Buchanan 2008). Chris Matthews, host of *Hardball*, pondered several times during the weeks of March whether Obama had a “glass jaw.” During February the New York Times noted: “If Hillary is in touch with her masculine side, Barry [Obama] is in touch with his feminine side” (Dowd 2008b). The month continued with print media diminishing Obama’s masculinity with various references to him as: a young prince (2008a), and later called him “OBambi” (Dowd 2008i). The New York Times called him “the diffident debutante” (Dowd 2008h), and “Wonder Boy” (Dowd 2008f).

Later, she carried the sex change metaphor further:

Despite [h]is strenuous and inadvertently hilarious efforts to woo working-class folk in Pennsylvania have only made him seem more effete...At the Wilbur chocolate shop in Lititz Monday, he spent most of his time skittering away from chocolate goodies, as though he were a starlet obsessing on a svelte waistline. (Dowd 2008e).

Continuing with the representation of Barack Obama as lacking in masculine credentials, New York Times columnist wrote: “Barry [Obama] has been trying to shake off Hillary and pivot for quite a long time now, but she has managed to keep her teeth in his ankle and raise serious doubts about his potency.” (Dowd 2008i).

Earlier, Dowd penned that Clinton “tried once more to cast Obama as a weak sister on his willingness to talk to Raúl Castro” (Dowd 2008b) and that “Obama tapped into his inner chick and turned the other cheek” (Dowd 2008b)

Re-centering Normative Whiteness: Channeling the Black Other

While one project during the primary sought to portray Obama as less than Black, another project operated frequently to remind the audiences that the candidate did not fit within the category of normative whiteness. Central to this project was the

vilification of Rev. Wright—a subject worthy of its own paper—and the association of Obama and his wife with the “Other” as described well in Winthrop Jordan’s classic, *White over Black* (1964). In January, one of the Clinton supporters, Andrew Cuomo stated in a clip that was replayed on all cable networks:

It’s not a TV-crazed race. Frankly you can’t buy your way into it. You can’t shuck and jive at a press conference... All those moves you can make with the press don’t work when you’re in someone’s living room. (Harshaw 2008)

It has been a long time since that particular, dated description has aired, but certainly it has never been used to describe a white man. It serves to mark a territory—press conferences—as ones off limit to those who do not perform as if white.

Perhaps the most frequently commented upon statement, maligning Obama as outside normative whiteness came from the Former President Clinton in handicapping the election in South Carolina. In response to this question: “What does it say about Barack Obama that it takes two of you to beat him?” Clinton, responded:

Jesse Jackson won South Carolina twice, in ’84 and ’88, and he ran a good campaign. And Sen. Obama’s run a good campaign here; he’s run a good campaign everywhere. He’s a good candidate with a good organization. (Seelye 2008)

The Former President’s comments were met with a backlash by both media and internet blogs alike. Nonetheless, one of his wife’s campaign managers, Harold Ickes reiterated the fact that Obama is outside the norm on NBC’s *Meet the Press*:

We have two really strong and very good candidates. This party has been blessed ... to have a woman who, I think will be the next president of the United States [and] to have a powerful spokesman in the form of Sen. Obama and he is, that’s one of the reasons I supported Jesse Jackson in 19894 and 1988, I thought we needed a strong, powerful candidate, a black candidate, running for president. (Ickes 2008)

In a continuation of the project to persuade the public to think of Obama as outside the category of normative whiteness, the press circulated a picture of Barack in Kenyan garb, resembling a Muslim. The photo, first published on Drudgereport.com, was allegedly leaked to the internet site by the Clinton campaign. Along with another widely circulated internet photo of three democratic candidates against the backdrop of a flag in which Obama’s hands are crossed while Clinton and Richardson’s are over their hearts, these served to announce that Obama was not like “us.” In what was latter roundly criticized as mendacious, Hillary Clinton added to the perception of Barack as outside the norm. In March 2008, CBS *60 Min* inquired of Clinton whether she believed Obama was a Muslim: Kroft: “You said you’d take Senator Obama at his word that he’s not...a Muslim. You don’t believe that he’s a...” Clinton: “No. No, there is nothing to base that on. As far as I know” (Clinton 2008). Despite the fact that the two Senators had attended Christian breakfast meetings for two years, Clinton let slide an impression that Barack may not be within the circle of normative whiteness. The “othering” continued and escalated in the Clinton rhetoric to explicitly define Barack as outside the mainstream.

Clinton in an interview with *USA Today*, cited by every major news outlet, underscores Obama’s race when stating “Sen. 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" (Phillips 2008).

From subtle "othering" to extreme and outlandish, FNC (Fox News Channel) cannot be outdone. After the victory in Oregon that took Obama over the top, there was a much televised clip of his wife, Michelle, giving him daps. The next morning, the FNC announcer on *American Pulse* introduced a segment with a body language expert with the lead in: "A fist bump? A pound? A terrorist fist jab? The gesture everyone seems to interpret differently" (E.D. Hill 2008). FNC later featured a clip of Michelle Obama on the *View* (a CBS morning talk show); the crawl below the clip referred to her as "Obama's Baby Mama" (Koppelman 2008). In fact, that description was displayed on screen several times during the segment, which featured anchor Megyn Kelly and conservative blogger Michelle Malkin. FNC executives issued an apology after blogs and news channels joined in a chorus of criticism for the remark (Koppelman 2008). This slur is not only racialized, but one that clearly sets the Obamas outside of normative whiteness.

Conclusion

Our interpretations are less a function of our social location on the axes of race, class and gender than of the discourses to which those locations make available to us for discussion (Harris-Lacewell 2004). The media, absent the intervention of the blogs, reflects the long established patterns of white supremacy and of hegemonic masculinity. Faced with a woman and a black man, the media set about to make sense of the historic race. In so doing, the commentators and the pundits relied on their "commonsense" understandings of race and gender. In rendering the white woman as a mythical man, her candidacy made sense. As a mythical white man, her candidacy did not challenge white supremacy as it continued to rely on understandings about the proper place for whites and for those exceptional white women who pantomimed masculinity in a way that challenged neither race nor gender.

In recasting the Black man candidate both as less than "Black," and less than manly, the ideological work of white supremacy remains in tack: should this man succeed to capture the nomination and perhaps the White House, his race and his masculinity have been diminished: he is seen as not quite Black but also not quite manly. This recasting of race and gender renders white supremacy if not intact, at least less threatened than the social order would be if stereotypical Black masculinity had won the election.

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