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Frank Rudy Cooper

University of Nevada, Las Vegas -- William S. Boyd School of Law

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Race and Essentialism in Gloria Steinem

Frank Rudy Cooper*

I. INTRODUCTION

A. *The Story of My Discovery of Angela Harris*

The book that I have referred to the most since law school is Katherine Bartlett and Roseanne Kennedys' anthology *FEMINIST LEGAL THEORY*.¹ The reason it holds that unique place on my bookshelf is that it contains the first copy I read of Angela Harris's essay *Race and Essentialism in Feminist Legal Theory*.² My edition now has at least three layers of annotations. As I reread it today, I recall my first reading.

I encountered the essay in my law school feminist theory class. Up to the point where we read Harris's article, I was probably a dominance feminist, having found Catherine MacKinnon's theory that women are a group bound together by patriarchal domination to be simpatico with my undergraduate training.³ After reading Harris, I became convinced that anti-essentialism—the critique of the notion that we can define an essential experience of any identity group independent of other identity characteristics⁴—was the most important movement in feminist legal theory and critical theory in general. I saw the rest of my course through the lens of Harris's ideas.

I next encountered Harris's article in a critical race theory class with the late Jerome McCristal Culp.⁵ The course focused on the intersectionality

* Professor, Suffolk University Law School. I dedicate this essay to my stepdaughter, Kalila Courban. I thank Ann Brown and Krystina Jean-Conte for helpful research assistance. I presented this essay at the 20th Anniversary Critical Race Theory Workshop at the University of Iowa College of Law. I thank David Kemp and the staff of the *Berkeley Journal of African-American Law & Policy* for editorial assistance. I welcome comments at fcooper@suffolk.edu.

1. *FEMINIST LEGAL THEORY: READINGS IN LAW AND GENDER* (Katherine T. Bartlett & Roseanne Kennedy eds., 1991)

2. Angela P. Harris, *Race and Essentialism in Feminist Legal Theory*, in *FEMINIST LEGAL THEORY*, *supra* note 1, at 235.

3. See Angela P. Harris, *Race and Essentialism in Feminist Legal Theory*, 42 *STAN. L. REV.* 581, 591-92 (1990) (characterizing MacKinnon's theories).

4. See *id.* at 585 (defining essentialism).

5. For a brief biography of Culp, see <http://www.law.du.edu/latcrit/JeromeMcCristal.htm> (describing LatCrit Culp lecture).

theory movement, a movement which Harris's essay helped spawn. Culp was both a mentor and friend to me. He convinced me that I could be a professor. He involved another student and me in the writing of the foreword to the first issue of this important law journal,⁶ which I am proud to see is now celebrating its fifteenth anniversary.⁷ It turns out that Culp was close friends with Harris. I often think about Culp, and I know Harris does as well.

With those connections in mind, I am particularly honored that Angela Onwuachi-Willig and the 20th Anniversary Critical Race Theory Workshop (CRT Workshop) committee asked me to reflect on Harris's essay. Harris is one of the foremost law professors in the country. She has co-written or co-edited several important critical race theory and feminist theory casebooks as well as a casebook for a first-year course.⁸ This particular essay is one of the most cited critical race theory pieces ever, having been referred to in at least 796 articles.⁹ To say that Harris's *Race and Essentialism* is an appropriate subject of reflection on the anniversary of the CRT Workshop would be an understatement.

B. Roadmap of This Essay

I draw two fundamental insights from Harris's essay. First, it is important to challenge essentialism in all of its forms. Essentialism can be defined as the notion that we can identify basic shared characteristics of women (or blacks or gays, etc.) that are essential to the group's experiences and interests.¹⁰ Essentialism leads one to marginalize other members of the group by describing them and their minority experiences as distinct and inessential. Second, it is important to recognize that people have "multiple consciousness" and to use that multiplicity as a basis for coalition-building. Multiple consciousness is the idea that the self is composed of multiple aspects of identity. Consequently, we are always "both... and..."; both gendered and raced, both gendered and sex oriented, and so on.¹¹ Coalition-building that recognizes our multiple consciousness is against essentialism and in favor of

6. See Jerome Culp et al., *Foreword: A New Journal of Color in a "Colorblind" World: Race and Community*, 1 AFR.-AM. L. & POL'Y REPORT 1 (1995) (Introducing Journal and arguing against colorblindness).

7. For information on the first issue, see <http://bjalp.org/CurrentIssue/past/past.html> (summarizing volume's contents).

8. See, e.g., KATHERINE T. BARTLETT ET AL., *GENDER AND LAW: THEORY, DOCTRINE, COMMENTARY* (3d ed. 2002); EMMA COLEMAN JORDAN & ANGELA P. HARRIS, *ECONOMIC JUSTICE: RACE, GENDER, IDENTITY & ECONOMICS* (2005); CYNTHIA LEE & ANGELA P. HARRIS, *CRIMINAL LAW: CASES AND MATERIALS* (2005); JUAN F. PEREA ET AL., *RACE AND RACES: CASES AND RESOURCES FOR A DIVERSE AMERICA* (2d ed. 2007); FRANCISCO VALDES ET AL., *CROSSROADS, DIRECTIONS, AND A NEW CRITICAL RACE THEORY* (2002). 37

9. I derived this number by conducting a LEXIS search for the title of the essay.

10. Harris, *supra* note 3, at 585.

11. See *id.* at 584 (defining multiple consciousness).

recognizing differences among members of the group.

As a means of reflecting on Harris's essay, I will analyze an important moment in the 2008 Presidential campaign. Senator Barack Obama, who is a black man, and Senator Hillary Clinton, who is a white woman, were locked in a tight race for the Democratic nomination. Gloria Steinem, a famous white female feminist, wrote an editorial supporting Clinton and deriding Obama. I will argue that Steinem's editorial, *Women Are Never Frontrunners*, exhibited a contemporary version of the gender essentialism and anti-coalitional thought that Harris criticizes.¹²

Part II of this essay provides a comprehensive summary of Harris's essay. Part III argues that Steinem's editorial contradicts the insights of Harris's essay. Part IV briefly concludes that progressives should build upon Harris's ideas to create a new anti-essentialist, coalition-oriented feminism.

II. THE STORY OF ANGELA HARRIS'S RACE AND ESSENTIALISM IN FEMINIST LEGAL THEORY

Because my goal here is to reflect on Harris's groundbreaking article, I now provide a detailed summary of her argument. She begins by discussing "voice." First, she discusses the voice of Jorge Luis Borges's character Funes the Memorious. After an accident, Funes underwent a transformation that left him with a perfect memory.¹³ He was able to completely reconstruct an entire day's experiences, but the process itself also took an entire day.¹⁴ He was unable to categorize and summarize his experiences, so he created his own numbering system, whereby 365 became "The Negro Timoteo." The problem with Funes's system was that it was comprehensible only to him and untranslatable.¹⁵ Harris contrasts the voice of Funes with that of "We the People" in the Declaration of Independence.¹⁶ The "We" in "We the People" purports to speak for the wisdom of all people throughout time.¹⁷ But in attempting to do so, it stifles differences, homogenizing the unique individual voices for which it claims to speak.¹⁸ This is the universal voice, as opposed to Funes's particular voice.

Harris argues that literature often speaks in the voice of Funes. "[A] poet may freely replace the Holocaust with a corn cob" because "[l]iterary language is purely self referential."¹⁹ In contrast, law speaks in the voice of "We the

12. Gloria Steinem, *Women Are Never Frontrunners*, NEW YORK TIMES, Jan. 8, 2008, at Op-Ed, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/08/opinion/08steinem.html?_r=1.

13. Harris, *supra* note 3, at 581.

14. *Id.*

15. *Id.*

16. *Id.*

17. *Id.*

18. *Id.* at 583.

19. *Id.* at 583.

People.” Legal thinkers seek “objectivity” over “subjectivity.”²⁰ Because law, as presently conceived, fails to incorporate every individual voice, it cannot construct “We the People” in a way that truly speaks for everyone.²¹ For Harris, the goal of both literature and law should be to understand multiple voices, both the particular and the universal, at once.²²

Harris then discusses the very metaphor of voice. The metaphor implies a speaker, but that speaker is not a coherent self.²³ The “self” is a composite of partial, contradictory, or even antithetical selves.²⁴ What people really have is not one consciousness, but “multiple consciousness.”²⁵ It is “a constant, contradictory state of becoming, in which both social institutions and individual wills are deeply implicated...home both to the first and second voice, and all the voices in between.”²⁶ Following pioneering critical race theorist Mari Matsuda, Harris advocates adopting multiple consciousness as a way to “allow us to operate both within the abstractions of standard jurisprudential discourse, and within the details of our special knowledge....”²⁷

Having cleared the theoretical space for her project, Harris turns to the task of tackling race and essentialism in feminist legal theory. “In the first wave of the feminist movement,” she declares, “black women’s realization that the white leaders of the suffrage movement intended to take neither issues of racial oppression nor black women themselves seriously was instrumental in destroying or preventing political alliances between black and white women within the movement.”²⁸ Harris relates that problem to a subsequent proposition by Elizabeth Spelman, that “the apparently straightforward and logical points and axioms at the heart of much feminist theory guarantee the direction of its attention to the concerns of white middle-class women.”²⁹ Harris connects gender essentialism to racial essentialism by pointing to “the belief that there is a monolithic ‘Black Experience’ or ‘Chicano Experience.’”³⁰ As other scholars have demonstrated, racial essentialism causes prioritization of the experiences and interests of heterosexual men.³¹ Consequently, black

20. *Id.*

21. *Id.*

22. *Id.* at 584.

23. For my explication of Judith Butler’s related theory of the self, see Frank Rudy Cooper, *Surveillance and Identity Performance: Some Thoughts Inspired by Martin Luther King*, 32 N.Y.U. REV. L. & SOC. CHANGE 517 (2009) (applying Butler’s theories to Fourth Amendment).

24. Harris, *supra* note 3, at 584.

25. *Id.*

26. *Id.*

27. *Id.* (quoting Mari Matsuda, *When the First Quail Calls; Multiple Consciousness as Jurisprudential Method*, 11 WOMEN’S RTS. L. REP. 7, 8 (1989)).

28. *Id.* at 586-87. While I challenge the notion that American feminism grew out of the twentieth century suffrage movement because that view obscures the roots of feminism in the abolitionist movement, I do agree that the suffrage movement was run by and for white women.³⁰

29. *Id.* at 588.

30. *Id.*

31. See, e.g., Devon W. Carbado, *Epilogue, BLACK MEN ON RACE, GENDER AND*

women, with their multiple consciousness, must fragment their experiences to fit within discourses based on what is common to gender or racial oppression.³²

The substantive part of Harris's essay provides two examples of racial essentialism in feminist thought. Her critique of Catharine MacKinnon begins by noting that MacKinnon treats feminism like Marxism, substituting the exploitation of women for the exploitation of workers.³³ The necessary conclusion of that comparison is that "there is only one 'true,' 'unmodified' feminism: that which analyzes women as women, not as subsets of some other group and not as gender-neutral beings."³⁴ MacKinnon's theory is essentialist in two basic ways: (1) it relegates issues of race to a separate discourse, and in doing so, (2) it identifies white women as "the epitome of woman."³⁵

Harris demonstrates the first problem by analyzing MacKinnon's discussion of a policy of a Native American tribe. In that discussion, MacKinnon points out that this tribe ostracizes children of tribal women who marry non-tribal men.³⁶ MacKinnon's conclusion from this discussion emphasizes gender discrimination without adequately addressing the significant racial and cultural contexts.³⁷ That emphasis pits Native American women's gender identities against their racial and cultural identities and forces them to prioritize gender to the exclusion of race and culture.³⁸ Harris, on the other hand, advocates "shift[ing] focus from gender to race and other facets of identity and back again..."³⁹ MacKinnon's failure to recognize the other aspects of this complex issue reveals the essentialist nature of her theory and marginalizes the experiences of women of color.

Harris's second critique of MacKinnon's theory is that it turns all women into white women. Harris defines "nuance theory" as any theory that generalizes about all women and then references the nuances of non-normative women in asides or footnotes.⁴⁰ By defining women of color as different, nuance theory selects white women as the norm.⁴¹ Color becomes an intensifier whereby if things are bad for women in general, they are especially bad for women of color.⁴² Harris counters nuance theory's assumption of basic

SEXUALITY: A CRITICAL READER (Devon W. Carbado ed., 1999) (detailing ways heterosexual men are privileged).

32. Harris, *supra* note 3, at 589.

33. *Id.* at 591.

34. *Id.* at 591-92.

35. *Id.* at 592.

36. On recent Native American exclusion of blacks, see Carla Pratt, *Tribal Kulturkampf: The Role of Race Ideology in Constructing Native American Identity*, 35 SETON HALL L. REV. 1241 (2005) (discussing refusal to acknowledge black Native Americans).

37. Harris, *supra* note 3, at 593-94.

38. *Id.* at 593.

39. *Id.* at 594.

40. *Id.* at 595.

41. *Id.* at 595-96.

42. *Id.* at 596.

sameness by pointing out that black women feel the beauty myth⁴³ not just as gendered oppression, but also as a white norm from which they are excluded.⁴⁴ Likewise, black women are both especially vulnerable to rape as a gendered crime and ambivalent about rape law as a tool of racial oppression.⁴⁵ Thus, black women's experiences are not only quantitatively, but also qualitatively different from white women's experiences.⁴⁶

Next, Harris critiques the racial essentialism in Robin West's feminist scholarship. West explicitly states that all women have a commonality based on their potential for child-rearing.⁴⁷ The notion that gender is primary to every individual's selfhood elevates white women's experiences of self over those of black women.⁴⁸ Women of color perceive self not primarily as a gendered self or a colored self, but as a self that is simultaneously gendered and colored.⁴⁹ Failing to recognize that fact, West's analysis perpetuates both essentialism in feminist theory and racial dominance in the larger society.⁵⁰

After explaining why essentialism prevails in feminist theory,⁵¹ Harris provides means for moving beyond essentialism. Progressives in general and feminists in particular can learn three things from women of color. First, we can appreciate that the self has multiplicities.⁵² We can learn what it is like to live with contradiction, as when we are both the oppressor and the oppressed.⁵³ Second, we can recognize that we become aware of parts of ourselves through relationships rather than by simply inventorying a distinct self.⁵⁴ When feminist theory can be as fluctuating, contingent, and strategic as the selfhood of those with multiple consciousness, it will be able to embrace differences among women and fight all forms of oppression.⁵⁵ Third, we can acknowledge that the wholeness of the self is a product of will.⁵⁶ It follows that will and creativity are necessary to forge feminist coalitions that recognize the

43. The beauty myth is a demand upon women that they attempt to meet an ideal of women in shape and overall appearance.

44. *Id.* at 597-98.

45. *Id.* at 601.

46. *Id.* at 595-96.

47. *Id.* at 603.

48. *Id.*

49. *Id.* at 604.

50. *Id.* at 694-05.

51. Harris says essentialism prevails for the following reasons: First, essentialism is easy because it allows one to avoid the ugliness in black women's lives. *Id.* at 605. Second, it is emotionally safe because it allows keeping the movement as peaceful and harmonious as possible. *Id.* Third, white women want the chance to be in a position of power, using commonality to control the agenda. *Id.* at 606. Fourth, people fear that if the women's movement tries to account for too many categories it will splinter. *Id.* at 607.

52. *Id.* at 608.

53. *Id.* at 609.

54. *Id.* at 610.

55. *Id.* at 611-12.

56. *Id.* at 612.

differences within and among women.⁵⁷

III. RACE AND ESSENTIALISM IN GLORIA STEINEM

Harris examined race and essentialism in feminist theory nearly twenty years ago. In many ways we have progressed substantially since then. For example, most contemporary feminist theorists vigilantly avoid essentialism. Yet in other arenas, such as mainstream media coverage of politics, we have a long way to go. The media widely described the Democratic Primary between Clinton and Obama as a struggle between gender and race. Gloria Steinem provides a particularly disappointing example of that phenomenon, demonstrating essentialism's continued prevalence. In this Part of the essay, I will argue that Steinem's editorial exhibits gender essentialism.

A. Gloria Steinem's Women Are Never Frontrunners

In an opinion-editorial that some credit with helping to tip the New Hampshire primary in Clinton's favor, Gloria Steinem implicitly argued that race and gender interests were in conflict in the Clinton-Obama contest. This editorial was especially important because it appeared in the *New York Times* just before New Hampshire voted and in the face of predictions of an Obama win.⁵⁸ Its author is perhaps the most famous living feminist. She thus arguably spoke to women, whose strong preference for Clinton was crucial to Clinton's eventual New Hampshire victory.⁵⁹ That victory is credited with keeping Clinton in the race after her loss in Iowa less than two weeks earlier.⁶⁰ I will review this op-ed in detail to demonstrate how it portrayed race and gender as in conflict.

Steinem begins by describing a hypothetical political candidate who sounds like a female version of Obama.⁶¹ She begins her next paragraph by imploring the reader to "[b]e honest" and consider whether that candidate could be elected to the U.S. Senate and then become a viable Presidential candidate less than one term later.⁶² For Steinem, the answer demonstrates that "[g]ender is probably the most restricting force in American life, whether the question is

57. *Id.* at 614.

58. For a false prediction of Clinton's demise, see Timothy Noah, *Steinem Makes Excuses for Hillary: Gender, Race, and the Presidency*, SLATE.COM, Jan. 8, 2008, available at <http://www.slate.com/id/2181646> ("Steinem's occasion for making this wildly obtuse statement is the New Hampshire primary, which Hillary Clinton will likely lose to Barack Obama, a black man.").

59. See *Stunner in N.H.: Clinton Defeats Obama. Resurgent McCain Savors Defeat of Romney, Huckabee in G.O.P. Race.* MSNBC.COM, Jan. 9, 2008, available at <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/22551718/> ("Women voted for Clinton over Obama by 13 percentage points.") 42

60. See *id.* (describing Clinton's plans to concede some races).

61. Steinem, *supra* note 12.

62. *Id.*

who must be in the kitchen or who could be in the White House.”⁶³ For her, the Iowa primary follows our historical pattern of change: “Black men were given the vote a half-century before women of any race... and generally have ascended to positions of power, from the military to the boardroom, before any women....”⁶⁴ Furthermore, given our incredibly gendered society, no female presidential candidate could successfully employ Obama’s emotional style⁶⁵ “because sexism is still confused with nature as racism once was....”⁶⁶ Steinem lists more reasons for the primacy of sexism over racism, including that “racism stereotyped black men as more ‘masculine’ for so long that some white men find their presence to be masculinity-affirming (as long as there aren’t too many of them)...”⁶⁷ Finally, the progress of black men has preceded that of white women “because there is still no ‘right’ way to be a woman in public power without being considered a you-know-what.”⁶⁸

At that point, Steinem pauses for a moment of intersectional analysis. “The caste systems of sex and race are interdependent,” she says, “and can only be uprooted together.”⁶⁹ Moreover, “[t]he abolition and suffrage movements progressed when united and were damaged by division; we should remember that.”⁷⁰

Yet that interlude is followed by reasons for supporting Clinton that include her having “no masculinity to prove.”⁷¹ That statement is consistent with Steinem’s worries about media coverage of the race: “he is seen as unifying by his race while she is seen as divisive by her sex”; “she is accused of ‘playing the gender card’ when citing the old boy’s club, while he is seen as unifying by citing civil rights confrontations”; “male Iowa voters were seen as gender-free when supporting their own, while female voters were seen as biased if they did and disloyal if they didn’t.”⁷² Steinem closes with a statement that people should be free to say they are supporting Clinton both because “she [would] be a great President and because she is a woman.”⁷³

63. *Id.*

64. *Id.*

65. *Id.* Obama’s emotional style is a positive for change. See Frank Rudy Cooper, *Our First Unisex President?: Black Masculinity and Obama’s Feminine Side*, 86 DENV. U. L. REV. 633, 660 (2009) [hereinafter Cooper, *Our First Unisex President?*] (concluding that Obama’s style breaks gender barriers).

66. Steinem, *supra* note 12.

67. *Id.*

68. *Id.*

69. *Id.*

70. *Id.*

71. *Id.*

72. *Id.*

73. *Id.*

B. Critiquing Women Are Never Frontrunners

I am critical of Steinem's editorial for two basic reasons. First, it contradicts Harris's approach by exhibiting gender essentialism. Second, it disrupts the type of coalition-building between anti-sexists and anti-racists that Harris advocates.

1. Steinem's Essentialism

Saying that gender is "the most restricting force" prioritizes gender over our many other identities.⁷⁴ Steinem's argument that sexism is more predominant than racism has the same effect. Further, there is a subtle, seemingly unintentional, equation of "women" with "white women." Steinem explicitly describes "women of any race" as being snubbed in favor of black male suffrage.⁷⁵ But, there is no mention of how women who are also black have done in the history of black men's supposed prioritization over all women.⁷⁶ A black woman's success would seem to count only in the woman column. The dismissal of a genuine discussion regarding the differences between black women and women in general reveals Steinem's intent to target white women as both the subject and audience of the article. Similar to MacKinnon, Steinem speaks of women as though their experience were monolithic. She seems to refer to women's voices as if there were only one instead of the multiple voices Harris calls on us to acknowledge. Steinem's resentful emphasis on black men's successes suggests that the interest at stake is a broad raceless interest in women succeeding ahead of black men. Moreover, by only addressing race with respect to Obama, Steinem fails to specify the ways that race and gender intersect for women of color. Hence, there is no mention of the fact that some people, especially black women, might want to break the race barrier to the Presidency as much as the gender barrier.

Steinem's gender essentialism is also problematic because it simply fails to accurately describe how gender played a role in this contest. Two sub-arguments emerge from this criticism of Steinem's gender essentialism. First, Sarah Palin's success weakens Steinem's argument. Palin is in some ways a female, Republican version of Obama. As a former sportscaster, she conveys much of the articulateness and charisma Obama exemplifies. As a former Mayor in her first term as Governor of a tiny populace, she is subject to the same claims of having a thin resume. That Palin could rise to national

74. *Id.*

75. *Id.*

76. If Steinem were to say that discussing women of color in an editorial about a race between a white woman and a black man would be a tangent, I would say this merely shows she has not understood Harris's point that gender is always intertwined with race. To discuss a white women's identity requires discussing race; to discuss a black man's identity demands discussing gender; to discuss how we as a people would fare under a particular Presidential candidate necessitates discussing women of color.

prominence so quickly disproves that only Obama's masculinity propelled him to success, although her conservative ideology certainly helped her attain the position of Vice Presidential nominee.⁷⁷ Further, Palin's success suggests that if a female Obama's success was thwarted, it would be because of the intersection of race and gender, and not just gender.

Second, and more importantly, masculinity played a more complicated role in the campaign than simply being an advantageous factor. We see this if we apply insights from the field of masculinities studies to this contest. Note that I say "masculinities" in the plural. Masculinities studies assumes the intersectionality of gender, race, sexual orientation, and so on, and thus that masculinities come in all different flavors.⁷⁸ Heterosexual black men do not have the same sense of self-identity and are not subject to the same stereotypes as heterosexual white men or gay black men.⁷⁹

I acknowledge that Steinem's insights into masculinity do partly explain how the intersection of race and gender aided Obama's success. Racism does paint black men as stereotypically more masculine,⁸⁰ which could help explain white men's greater comfort with Obama than with Clinton. Still, as I note in my essay, *Our First Unisex President?: Black Masculinity and Obama's Feminine Side*, that comfort is also about class. Obama's style is especially appealing to professional men.⁸¹ That makes sense when one considers that hypermasculinity, with its special emphasis on putting down racial minority men, is more prevalent among working-class men.⁸²

Further, while Obama had to prove his masculinity, he also had to have a

77. For an insightful comparison of the challenges Clinton and Palin faced, see Ann C. McGinley, *Hillary Clinton, Sarah Palin, and Michelle Obama: Performing Gender, Race, and Class on the Campaign Trail*, 86 DENV. U. L. REV. 709 (2009) (analyzing treatment of women in 2008 Presidential campaign).

78. See Cooper, *Our First Unisex President?*, *supra* note 65, at 642 (describing shared tenets of critical race theory and masculinities studies).

79. Given the way masculinities studies has adopted antiessentialist principles, it should come as no surprise that Harris has made an important contribution to the law and masculinities studies literature. See Angela Harris, *Gender, Violence, Race, and Criminal Justice*, 52 STAN. L. REV. 777 (2000) (applying masculinities studies to criminal justice). For my own thoughts on masculinities and policing, see Frank Rudy Cooper, "Who's the Man?": *Masculinities and Police Stops*, 18 COLUM. J. GENDER & L. (2009) (arguing for reforming police training to reduce macho policing).

80. See Gail Dines, *The White Man's Burden: Gonzo Pornography and the Construction of Black Masculinity*, 18 YALE J. L. & FEMINISM, 283 (2006) (discussing hypermasculinization of black men in pomography).

81. See Jewell Woods, *Why Guys Have a Man-Crush on Obama; Sure Men Swoon, But Modern Men Seem Weak-Kneed, Too*, CHICAGO SUN-TIMES, July 24, 2008, at 25 (discussing Obama's appeal for men).

82. See Karen D. Pyke, *Class-Based Masculinities: The Interdependence of Gender, Class, and Interpersonal Power*, 10 GENDER & SOC'Y 527, 531 (1996) (noting the way some men compensate themselves for their low class status by denigrating men who are beneath them along another axis of identity, such as sex orientation or race).

feminine side.⁸³ Steinem acknowledges that Obama has a somewhat feminine emotional style (relative to what we would expect from a Presidential candidate).⁸⁴ His emphasis on listening and negotiation as well as his non-aggressive nature in the face of attacks also were deemed to be stereotypically feminine traits.⁸⁵ Obama's success was based in part on that style, not just his being male. But, the reason Obama had to have a feminine side is that negative stereotypes of black men deterred Obama from demonstrating the aggressive style expected from a President.⁸⁶ Obama could not afford to be perceived as another angry black male.⁸⁷

Finally, being male had its downsides for Obama. Obama was also subjected to the imperatives of hegemonic masculinity.⁸⁸ He was denigrated as "prissy" and called on to be more aggressive.⁸⁹ The title of an editorial exemplifies the pressure Obama was under to act in the aggressive manner associated with masculinity: *Where's his Right Hook? Barack Obama Seems Refreshingly Decent. Can he Survive Hardball Politics?*⁹⁰ Such criticism occurred, in part, because Obama was a male with a more feminine style. In sum, Obama was not as advantaged by masculinity as Steinem presumes. Steinem's assumptions about the essential nature of femininity and masculinity led her to miss much about the Clinton-Obama contest.

2. Steinem's Anti-Coalitional Effect

A second basic problem with Steinem's piece is that it disrupts the type of coalition-building between anti-sexists and anti-racists that Harris advocates. Despite its disclaimers to the contrary, the piece, by constantly comparing race and gender, unmistakably implies conflict between race and gender interests.

83. I am referring to mainstream popular assumptions about femininity. See Cooper, *Our First Unisex President?*, *supra* note 65, at 634-35 (considering the meaning of "femininity").

84. See Steinem, *supra* note 12.

85. See Cooper, *Our First Unisex President?*, *supra* note 65, at 649-50 (discussing the gendered framing of the Obama-McCain contest).

86. See *id.* at 654 (arguing that the angry black man stereotype affected Obama).

87. See *id.* at 654-55 (describing Obama's need to avoid this stereotype).

88. See *id.* at 656-58 (arguing masculinities studies helps explain pressures on Obama not to be too feminine).

89. See *id.* at 656 (relating the "prissy" comment). Steinem also fails to consider that Obama was not the only one who had to prove masculinity. Clinton was in the awkward position of having to out-macho the competition. See *id.* at 658 (noting Clinton's need to out-macho opponents). Simultaneously, though, Clinton had a "likeability" problem that seemed gendered. See Ann Simpson, *America at last warms to thawing "Chillary,"* HERALD (GLASGOW, SCOTLAND), Jan. 25, 2008, at 7, available at 2008 WLNR 1480733 (linking Clinton's likeability problem to gender). She may have been most liked when she deviated from hegemonic masculinity, as when she teared up prior to her New Hampshire victory. See *id.* (describing Clinton's tears as helping her be better liked). 46

90. Maureen Dowd, Editorial, *Where's his Right Hook? Barack Obama Seems Refreshingly Decent. Can he Survive Hardball Politics?*, PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETTE, March 5, 2007, at B7 (noting criticism of Obama's lack of aggression).

To argue that black men have been prioritized over women in nearly every arena ever since Reconstruction is to set the two groups against one another.⁹¹ To state five reasons that sexism is more prevalent than racism emphasizes the conflict.⁹² To give three ways in which media sexism is more worrisome than media racism effectively drives a wedge between gender and race.⁹³ This editorial thus participates in a phenomenon it nominally opposes; it divides anti-sexists from anti-racists.⁹⁴

Steinem followed up on her portrayal of a conflict between race and gender in an interview at the end of March 2008. When asked whether gender was “that much more of an issue than race,” Steinem responded that “if a woman with the same qualifications as Obama ran for President, she would have never gotten this far.”⁹⁵ The very question implies a conflict between gender and race, and Steinem’s answer confirms that assumption. She roots the conflict in the way the status quo responds to gender and racial challenges: “Females are half of everything, so they’re more threatening. African-American men are 6 percent of the population.”⁹⁶ On the theory that black men are less threatening than women, Steinem believes “the majority of the country wants redemption about racism” and not yet about misogyny.⁹⁷ So Steinem’s theory of society is that it pits racial minorities against women and then prefers racial minority men over women.

To be fair to Steinem, she did deny that she intended to turn the feminist vote and the anti-racist vote against each other.⁹⁸ She also was quick to endorse Obama following Clinton’s withdrawal from the race.⁹⁹ Still, the memorable part of Steinem’s contribution to the Clinton-Obama race was her portrayal of gender and race as in conflict.

IV. CONCLUSION

The media has hit upon Obama’s love of Doris Kearns Goodwin’s book on Lincoln, *Team of Rivals*.¹⁰⁰ It has decided that Obama’s appointment of Clinton as Secretary of State makes this a “Team of Rivals.” We must change

91. Steinem, *supra* note 12.

92. *Id.*

93. *Id.*

94. *See id.* (arguing abolition and suffrage movements were harmed by not joining together).

95. Colette Bancroft, *Steinem’s thoughts on politics, feminism*, ST. PETERSBURG TIMES, Mar. 26, 2008, at 5.

96. *Id.*

97. *Id.*

98. *Id.*

99. *See* Margery Eagen, *Feminist Pioneer: Hillary has made history, now vote Obama*, BOSTON HERALD, June 5, 2008, at 12 (relating Steinem’s endorsement).

100. DORIS KEARNS GOODWIN, *TEAM OF RIVALS: THE GENIUS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN* (Simon & Schuster 2005).

the terms of the debate. Maybe we progressives can move from being a team of rivals to being a team.

Harris has illuminated the way toward creating that team. We must challenge essentialism in all its forms. We must forge coalitions that acknowledge the differences among group members without pitting them against one another. That means being anti-essentialist about masculinity as well as femininity and race. One component of that work will be an anti-essentialist black male feminism.¹⁰¹ Steinem should join *MS. Magazine* in considering the possibility that Obama might be “what a feminist looks like.”¹⁰²

101. See generally BLACK MEN ON RACE, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY, *supra* note 31 (collecting black male feminist essays).

102. See <http://msmagazine.com/winter2009/index.asp> (last visited April 12, 2009) (depicting Obama wearing a “This is what a feminist looks like” tee-shirt on the cover).