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on issues affecting African Americans
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By The Reverend Irene Monroe

BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board

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The BlackCommentator Readers' Corner Blog

First Commentary

Will "Feminists for Obama" help us?

Michelle Obama won't use the F-word. Alice Walker called it by another name. Her daughter, Rebecca Walker, an icon of the "Third Wave" of feminism, redefined the F-word and then denounced it. And when Hillary Clinton used the F-word, before she ran for president, she got clobbered with rumors stating she was an L.U.G. - "lesbian until graduation" - because she got married to Bill, and then an L.A.G - "lesbian after graduation" - because of her marriage to Bill.

With the Democratic National Convention (DNC) this week, the delegates that identify

themselves as "Feminists for Obama" will come out in droves. The trek to Colorado will be made by dykes, dykettes, dykelings, bi-sisters, trannies and, oh yeah, our straight sisters, too. But as my LBT friends have pointed out to me, the sisterhood between straight feminists and us is strained at best and nonexistent at worst. And with Hillary Democrats moving slowly over to the Obama camp, we LBT women also move with hesitancy, given Obama's stance on same-sex marriage.

While the fault lines are already rearing up among "Feminists for Obama," so, too, are the fault lines of gender expressions and sexual orientation, as LBT women attempt to convince our straight sisters that our families, like theirs, matter.

And while I believe many of our straight sisters understand our struggle, will they forge a sisterhood with us against a presidential candidate who supports civil unions for same-sex couples but not marriage?

"He can't take on this issue now and win the election. Wait until he gets into office. I think he'll do it," argues Gaby Meadows, a lesbian from Maine.

During the DNC in 2004, our issues got swept under the convention-floor rug. In the Democrats' effort to neither bash Bush nor bring up hot-button topics that might turn away swing voters, the elephant in the middle of the convention floor was the issue of marriage equality. And as the Democrats donned Republican drag, the DNC left Boston reneging on one of its platform promises: to support "equal responsibilities, benefits and protections" for LGBTQ families.

But in the Democrats' rhetoric to secure a safer world for all children, they did not understand that our children must grow up with the same rights as others and that the children of LGBTQ parents must also have those rights.

And can we, this time, rely on straight "Feminists for Obama" to help us?

Feminists for centuries have fought for reproductive justice and family protection. But they have also viewed us LBT women as a liability to the women's movement. In 1969, Betty Friedan, then president of the National Organization for Women, and an icon of the "Second Wave" of feminism, called us "the Lavender Menace." This created not only a chasm between straight and LBT feminists, but also even bigger chasms between Black and white feminists, and between Black men and women that still exist today and have me worried that these tensions will get played out on the convention floor.

Going into DNC 2008, "Feminists for Obama" face not only the expected infighting classic to the feminist movement, but they also face, with the current backlash to feminism, their own struggle for legitimacy. And a woman who benefited from all the feminist movements - past and present - and could be important to their cause is not a feminist: the Democratic presidential nominee's wife, Michelle Obama.

Michelle Obama told Washington Post writer Anne E. Kornblut in May 2007, just months after her husband's announcement of his run, that she's not a feminist.

"You know, I'm not that into labels," Michelle Obama told Kornblut. "So probably, if you laid out a feminist agenda, I would probably agree with a large portion of it. ... I wouldn't identify as a feminist, just like I probably wouldn't identify as a liberal or a progressive."

When white feminists pounced on Michelle Obama for not using the F-word, many African-American sisters came to her rescue, stating that many African-American women don't use the term "feminist", but instead prefer the term "womanist" because

of the racism embedded in the feminist movement and the strained history that remains unaddressed.

But if truth be told, the creation of the word "womanist" was to conceal "the Lavender Menace," keeping on the down-low the homosocial and homosexual relationship between two black church women.

Walker specifically devised the term in response to Jean Humez's introduction to the book *Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson, Black Visionary, Shaker Eldress*. Humez suggested that Rebecca Jackson and Rebecca Perot, who were part of an African-American Shaker settlement in Philadelphia in the 1870s and lived with each other for more than 30 years, would be labeled lesbians in today's climate of acknowledging female relationships. Humez supported her speculations of the Jackson-Perot relationship by pointing to the homoerotic dreams the women had of each other. Walker disputed Humez's right, as a white woman from a different cultural context, to define the intimacy between two African-American women.

But many African-American sisters don't use either term because both have been and continue to be used for lesbian-baiting in the African-American community that has kept Black women from identifying themselves even to each other, let alone publicly.

In the last convention, DNC delegates who were supporters of marriage equality were disallowed from bringing signs into Boston's Fleet Center for what was cited as "security reasons" and that "the campaign wants to get a consistent message out." Of the 4,300-plus delegates, 255 delegated were identified as LGBTQ. And where one would think that these people should have been the loudest advocates for marriage equality, they, too, skirted the issue for fear of losing the election.

Let's not make this mistake again.

Why?

Because the distance between straight "Feminists for Obama" protecting their families and LBT women protecting our families is just a child away.

Second Commentary

Obama Owes Hillary Some "R-E-S-P-E-C-T"!

The second night of the Democratic National Convention (DNC), Obama's toughest rival for the presidential nominee, Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton delivered a knockout keynote address, bridging the chasm between her supporters and his.

Hillary waxed eloquently about what America can envision with an Obama presidency. Her no-holds-barred attacks were double jabs with humor at both McCain and Bush, highlighting how McCain's vision for Americans for the next four years will be indistinguishable from Bush's unimpressive eight we have had.

"It makes sense that George Bush and John McCain will be together next week in the Twin Cities. Because these days they're awfully hard to tell apart."

She tied her message to Obama's and the Democratic platform's of "Renewing America's Promise."

"I ran for President to renew the promise of America. To rebuild the middle class and sustain the American Dream, to provide the opportunity to work hard and have that work rewarded, to save for college, a home and retirement, to afford the gas and groceries and still have a little left over each month...Those are the reasons I ran for President. Those are the reasons I support Barack Obama. And those are the reasons you should too."

And Hillary thanked her supporters for their indefatigable support of her run for the White House.

"To my supporters, my champions - my sisterhood of the traveling pantsuits - from the bottom of my heart: Thank you. You never gave in. You never gave up. And together we made history."

But not everybody is on board after Hillary's speech to now unite with Obama. And her sisterhood of traveling pantsuits, in particular, still might not all cast their ballots for Obama, come November.

Many of these women saw Hillary's speech as conciliatory, at best, for the unification of party at the expense of her historic achievement, and obligatory, at worst, in order for her to have a future life in the party. And although this schism between Hillary's Democrats and Obama's is not ideological in terms of the party's direction, this schism, nonetheless, can be catastrophic and, unfortunately, the deal-breaker that sidelines Obama's bid. Hillary supporters' rallying cry is to the tune of the August 1965 hit and signature song "'Respect" by R&B singer Aretha Franklin that came to exemplify the feminist movement.

And the two groups of pro-Hillary supporters we hear from the loudest - the "Party Unity My Ass (PUMA)" and "18 Million Voices" - feel "dissed", not only by the Obama campaign for not vetting Hillary for the V.P. slot but also by the Democratic Party for not addressing the glaring gender obstacles Hillary confronted. These groups are now out on the streets of Denver and online, protesting.

PUMA, seen as a radical group, advises Hillary supporters to dissociate from the party, stating "Hillary Clinton is the strongest candidate for the party and the nation. Dissociate yourself from the party. The deep problem of Obama's campaign is that they will not acknowledge that Hillary is a legitimate political actor and instead reduce her to an inhuman monster and enemy. They will not acknowledge that her supporters have sound, rational reasons for our support, and reduce us to mindless fools and spoils of war."

"18 Million Voices" is a grassroots organization that advocates for Women's Rights worldwide and doesn't want Hillary's historic achievement of being the first viable woman presidential candidate forgotten.

The race for the White House between Obama and Hillary highlighted the fault lines of both race and gender, and a nation still at the cross roads of how to overcome these social ills. And with a media that pandered to Obama's charm and parsed Hillary's words, we saw not only unfair treatment of the candidates but also a race/gender divide among Democrats as a consequence of it.

The differences between the two candidates, pundits argue, are slight. Hillary supporters, however, are not buying it. And after Hillary's address last night at the DNC these same pundits are now scratching their heads and questioning Obama's choice of

Joe Biden over Hillary Clinton for V.P. But Democrats won't know what kind of president or V.P. Hillary would be because race in this instance did indeed trumped gender. The alchemy of the two in a male- dominated society I confront all the time as a black woman.

The Democratic Party now has to figure out a way to woo the 18 million cracks in the glass ceiling, referring to 18 million who voted for Hillary, and the DNC alone won't do it. And I believe Obama will get most of those voters, mine included.

But as Obama's campaigners court Hillary voters, play Aretha before you knock on my door, especially this part:

"What you want (Obama) baby I got it.
What you need (Obama) do you know I got it?
(Hooo) all I'm asking (Obama) is for a little respect.
Just a little bit.
R-E-S-P-E-C-T find out what it means to me."

BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board member, the Rev. Irene Monroe, is a religion columnist, theologian, and public speaker. A native of Brooklyn, Rev. Monroe is a graduate from Wellesley College and Union Theological Seminary at Columbia University, and served as a pastor at an African-American church before coming to Harvard Divinity School for her doctorate as a Ford Fellow. Reverend Monroe is the author of [Let Your Light Shine Like a Rainbow Always: Meditations on Bible Prayers for Not-So-Everyday Moments](#). Click on the above link to order now at pre-release pricing. As an African American feminist theologian, she speaks for a sector of society that is frequently invisible. Her website is irenemonroe.com. Click [here](#) to contact the Rev. Monroe.

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