

# Introduction

*Beverly Guy-Sheftall and Johnnetta Betsch Cole*

The Clinton–Obama contest for the Democratic nomination sparked more heated debate among feminists than at any time since the 1970s.

—Meredith Tax

Like most book projects, this one began long before what appears to have motivated it—in this case, the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign. Having grown up in the Jim Crow South before the Civil Rights Movement, we would never have imagined that we would publish an anthology whose focus is the race/gender debate among feminists in the wake of a Black man and a White woman running for the Democratic nomination for president. Like most Blacks of our generation, including feminists, we would have assumed—not in our lifetimes would we see a Black president in the White House. We certainly heard this litany over and over again—*not in our lifetimes*—around dinner tables, during television and radio interviews, at conference panel discussions, on university campuses, and even among seasoned politicians. Most Blacks of a certain age probably assumed we would see a White woman in the White House before a Black man or woman.

When the presidential campaign began in 2007, we engaged in animated discussions, like many feminists here and around the globe. Initially, Cole supported Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton and Guy-Sheftall was mostly neutral, even espousing a favorable response to Sen. John Edwards, which she now regrets. Neither one of us knew very much about Sen. Barack Obama. We believed that he did not have a chance as a Black candidate for the most coveted office in the land, given what we thought would be the voting habits of too many White Americans. We also thought that many Black Americans would likely support Sen. Clinton given their loyalty to former President Bill Clinton, their concern about Sen. Obama's relatively young age, his childhood outside the United States, his biracial heritage,

and especially his being largely unknown. Like many Black Americans our ages, we also wondered if Sen. Obama had sufficient experience for the presidency given his short time in the U.S. Senate. Guy-Sheftall recalls having been in the Mississippi Delta giving a talk at a Black college and speaking with lots of ordinary Black folks who were committed Democrats and avid President Clinton supporters; although many of them were excited about Sen. Obama's quest for the presidency, they felt he needed to wait—"it's not his time yet," they repeated with both ambivalence and pride. They were supporting Sen. Clinton and would be thrilled to support Sen. Obama after her presidency was finished some four or eight years later.

As the campaign continued, Guy-Sheftall started to lean toward supporting Sen. Clinton, mainly because she believed Sen. Obama was unelectable. But as the campaign progressed even further, she began to develop negative attitudes toward Sen. Clinton because of what she perceived to be her pandering to conservative White voters, her hawkish comments, and her hostile interactions with Sen. Obama during televised debates. Guy-Sheftall also became increasingly frustrated with former President Clinton's disparaging remarks on the campaign trail about Sen. Obama's readiness for the presidency and Sen. Clinton's silence about her husband's seeming inability to control his anger about Obama's increasing popularity, especially among Blacks, and gains in the polls. She remembers very distinctly the point at which she decided, finally, to support Sen. Obama. Riveted by his memoir, *Dreams of My Father*, now more familiar with his progressive views about race, gender, class, and sexuality, and having reflected more deeply about his anti-Iraq War position (as opposed to Sen. Clinton's support), she was convinced that he would make a better president than any of the contenders. She was also drawn to the ways in which he did not embody stereotypical male traits. Although others sometimes described him as weak, henpecked, even wimpy, Guy-Sheftall liked his public displays of affection toward his wife and daughters, and what appeared to be his notions about egalitarian relationships with women, including his wife.<sup>1</sup> Having listened carefully to people who had known him over the years, she also thought he was more candid and trustworthy. In other words, Sen. Obama was emerging as a candidate whom she respected and admired for his views and character, although she still didn't think he would make it to the White House.

Cole had met Sen. Obama on two occasions before the campaign for the presidency began, and in each situation she was impressed by the way he carried himself. Once the campaign began, she was attracted to the policies he was articulating, and felt genuine pride in the fact that a Black was running for the presidency. However, she supported Sen. Clinton. There were several factors that influenced that decision. First, and certainly importantly, she knew Clinton far better than she knew Obama. Indeed Cole had known Sen. Clinton since the late 1980s when as First Lady, Sen. Clinton had visited Spelman during the early

years of Cole's presidency at the college. During the time that Cole served on President Clinton's transition team, she had brief but very positive interactions with Hillary Clinton; and once the Clintons were in the White House, Cole was pleased to be invited there on a few occasions; and in other venues, she had favorable interactions with "The First Sister," as Cole called Clinton.

As the campaign progressed, Cole became increasingly impressed by the policies that Sen. Obama was articulating, what appeared to be his profeminist views, and how in public settings he interacted with Michelle Obama and their daughters, Sasha and Malia. At the same time, Cole became increasingly concerned by the way that Sen. Clinton was presenting herself, and even more concerned by the way that she was attacking Sen. Obama. However, it was President Clinton's negative attacks on Sen. Obama, and Sen. Clinton's silence about these attacks that began to turn Cole away from supporting Sen. Clinton for the presidency. What finally made Cole switch her support from Clinton to Obama was her growing sense that Sen. Clinton was at the head of a strong political machine, but Obama was leading a powerful movement.

When she was a Clinton supporter, Cole received several attacks from Black women for her "support of a White woman over a Black man." And when she switched her support to Obama, several White women asked her how she could cease supporting a woman for the presidency.

In an eloquent letter to Barack Obama (*The New York Observer*, January 28, 2008), Toni Morrison, who had never publicly endorsed a presidential candidate, reveals—perhaps surprisingly—that neither race nor gender was a factor in her decision to support him.

I have admired Senator Clinton for years. Her knowledge always seemed to me exhaustive; her negotiation of politics expert. However, I am more compelled by the quality of mind (as far as I can measure it) of a candidate. I cared little for her gender as a source of my admiration, and the little I did care was based on the fact that no liberal woman has ever ruled in America. . . . Nor do I care very much for your race[s]. I would not support you if that was all you had to offer or because it might make me "proud."

In the midst of our decision making, we began to read commentary by many White feminists concerning their embrace of Sen. Clinton (especially because she was a woman and a feminist) and the counter-arguments among Black women, some of whom were feminists, about their preference for Sen. Obama (especially because he was Black and committed to human rights and racial equality). When prominent White feminists Robin Morgan and Gloria Steinem wrote about their support of Sen. Clinton (included in this anthology), the debate among feminists became more contentious and the hostility of

large numbers of Black women became more palpable.<sup>2</sup> Law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw and playwright Eve Ensler wrote a response, “Feminist Ultimatums: Not In Our Name,” that was posted in *Huffington Post*, February 5, 2008. We expected to include that essay in this collection but they chose not to have it reprinted because of the backlash they had experienced as a response to the stance they took about Sen. Clinton and their support of Sen. Obama.

The situation was becoming so explosive among feminists that Crenshaw and Guy-Sheftall reflected on the feasibility of convening a gathering that would include Steinem and Morgan, as well as Black feminists who were becoming increasingly frustrated by the debate surrounding the differential impact of racism versus sexism in the U.S political context. In the meantime, a National Advisory Board of Spelman College’s Women’s Research and Resource Center had been formed to assist with the Center’s new endowment campaign.<sup>3</sup> The Board includes Cole, Crenshaw, and Steinem, among others. Because Steinem had agreed to host the Center’s first fundraising event at her home in New York City on February 22, 2008, we decided to invite a small group of feminists, most of who were already in New York City, for a private brunch that Saturday morning, February 23. The group included Patricia Williams, Janet Dewart Bell, Farah Griffin, Robin Morgan (unable to attend), Ellie Smeal, Carole Jenkins, Laura Flanders, Mab Segrest, and Achola Pala Okeyo.<sup>4</sup> The purpose of the intimate gathering was to create a safe space where we could engage in candid discussion, “straight talk,” about the negative impact among feminists, in particular, from the debate surrounding the Barack versus Clinton candidacy for president. We wanted to discuss the anger and frustration that many Black and White women were experiencing because of what appeared to be the privileging of gender over race in these increasingly rancorous debates, as well as the nature of White feminist anger about Sen. Clinton’s treatment during the campaign. In some sense, the meeting was perceived to be a healing moment among a group of feminists who were deeply divided about the candidates. The group was never intended to be representative or exclusionary; we invited feminists who were in New York that weekend and whom we knew. Those of us who gathered were concerned about deep fissures in the women’s movement in the United States. In particular, we were concerned about a growing tension between White feminists and feminists of color surrounding the appropriate Democratic candidate for president. We shared our views about how we thought we had arrived at this impasse and recalled previous historic occasions when feminists found themselves divided around issues of race and gender.<sup>5</sup> We hoped that other groups of feminists would gather as well because we intended to craft a short essay about our meeting. We do not rehearse the arguments here that precipitated the debate or fueled our Saturday morning conversation because our communal essay includes a broad range of commentary about the issue. Following several hours of frank talk, Williams, a professor of

law at Columbia and a columnist for *The Nation*, agreed to craft an essay that would capture the content of our deliberations and the broader significance of the issues we discussed. We agreed that Williams would circulate a first draft among all of us, that we would make suggestions or edits, and that the final version would be submitted to *The Nation*, because it would likely get broad circulation as well as reach the public quickly. “Morning in America: A Letter from Feminists on the Election,” appeared in *The Nation* March 17, 2008, and is reprinted here as well.

In the meantime, we began to gather the voluminous writings by feminists that appeared on the Web, in newspapers, magazines, and journals—much of it having been generated by Morgan’s and Steinem’s commentaries. At this point, we were not planning a book project, but rather getting prepared for our various speaking engagements on the issue. Cole was preparing a lecture to be presented as a distinguished lecture at the 2009 meetings of the American Anthropological Association. The title of that talk is “Race and Gender in the 2008 Presidential Election: A Mirror on U.S. Culture.” Guy-Sheftall was preparing for a panel presentation at the Einstein Forum in Potsdam, Germany, June 2008, on “Race and Gender in American Politics.”<sup>6</sup> At the annual conference of the National Women’s Studies Association in June 2007, Guy-Sheftall participated on a panel, “A Conversation about the Election Debate Among Feminists: Implications for Our Movement.”<sup>7</sup> When the panel was over, Larin McLaughlin, editor at SUNY Press, approached her about a possible book project. When Guy-Sheftall returned to Atlanta, she talked with Cole about co-editing an anthology that would enable them to make use of the material they had been collecting. The book would capture for posterity the nature of the debate, include the writings of well-known and not so well-known feminists, as well as provide some reflections about the election and its aftermath of the first Black president in the United States—Barack Hussein Obama.

In the meantime, Cole and Guy-Sheftall, having decided to support Sen. Obama, volunteered to campaign for him in Ohio, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Virginia, Georgia, and Florida. We spoke at churches, women’s groups, and on college campuses. These were exhilarating experiences for both of us, and on the night of the election, we hunkered down in Guy-Sheftall’s living room in Atlanta, expecting a long fretful night, and watched the returns together. When Sen. Obama was declared the next president of the United States before midnight, Cole wept and Guy-Sheftall sat quietly in disbelief. Cole attended his historic inauguration in Washington, D.C. on that frigid Tuesday, January 20, and Guy-Sheftall watched it on television with a group of faculty, staff, and students at Bucknell University where she was speaking that evening.

When President Obama announced that his choice for secretary of state was Hillary Clinton, we assumed that they had resolved their differences, healed their wounds, and committed themselves to working together to bring about

the changes that the world so desperately needed. In the aftermath of their new partnership, we thought it was even more imperative to complete this book. We believed that what we learned as feminists of all races and ages during many painful, even heart-wrenching moments during the campaign would be instructive in the future. At the very least we hoped that never again—*not in our lifetimes*—would we minimize or fail to comprehend the dire consequences of pitting race against gender in any political arena, including presidential campaigns.

With respect to the anthology's content, we wanted to include a cross-section of feminists, so there are generational, regional, racial, class, and ideological differences among the contributors. They are a contender for the presidency, award winning journalists, young female activists, antiracist/feminist men, college professors at prestigious universities and historically Black colleges, icons of the women's movement in the United States, world-renown writers, colleagues, people with whom we have worked closely, and people we have never met. The book is organized thematically. The first section, "Editorials, Opinions, Petitions," includes editorials and other opinion pieces that appeared in a variety of publications, as well as petitions generated by feminists about both candidates. The second section, "Personal Reflections: Having Our Say," includes mostly personal essays that appeared in a variety of locations including personal Websites and blogs. The third section, "Essays: Making Our Case," includes articles and essays that make the case for their widely divergent arguments about the candidates. The majority of these contributions had already appeared in print. We believed the book would be stronger if we also solicited new essays. We wanted to hear from former Sen. Carol Moseley Braun, the second Black woman to seek the Democratic nomination for president. We believed the book would be incomplete without Native American feminists or feminists of color who live outside the United States. We wanted reflections that are informed by Black feminist theory and queer theory. We wanted to hear from college/university students.

The final section, "Post-Election: What We Learned," includes new essays that reflect on the Obama presidency and what we learned in the aftermath of the debates that sparked this book project. This section includes an essay by Black feminists who live in Amsterdam, England, and Toronto; they have Caribbean roots, are university professors, scholar/activists, and write from transnational feminist theoretical perspectives. Finally, we decided to include Barack Obama's historic acceptance speech for his party's nomination, which he delivered in Denver, Colorado, August 28, 2008, at the Democratic National Convention. We also include Hillary Clinton's call for unity speech, which she delivered in Denver on August 26, 2008, in support of Obama's candidacy for the presidency. Because of the historic significance of Michelle Obama as the nation's first Black first lady, we also include her speech.

The five years we spent writing *Gender Talk: The Struggle for Women's Equality in African American Communities* (Random House, 2005) sharpened our analytical tools with respect to the importance of employing intersectional approaches to thorny U.S. political debates. Among the many delights of being Black feminists is having something useful to say about rancorous debates around race and gender matters. The race for the White House between Senators Obama and Clinton was the most divisive battle we have witnessed among feminists in our lifetimes. What we know for sure is this: Given the issues we care about, both senators would have been better for the nation and the world than any of their Republican contenders. It also would have been impossible to predict with certainty—based on their race *and* gender—who would have been better prepared to turn around the economic recession; end the war in Iraq; address the impact of religious fundamentalisms here and around the globe; deliver a workable health care plan; find solutions for poverty and the increasing gap between the rich and the poor; eradicate the pandemic of HIV/AIDS; stop sex trafficking and violence against women and girls; as well as rid the world of racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, and classism.

We remain hopeful about the forty-fourth president of the United States, Barack Hussein Obama, and the ability of his extraordinary team, including Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, to bring about the changes the world so desperately needs. YES, THEY CAN!!!

## Notes

1. Professor Gary Lemons, in his recently published book, includes a compelling and insightful Epilogue, “This is What a (Black Male) Feminist Looks Like: Time Has Brought about a Change,” in which he reflects on President Obama’s progressive gender politics, his “vision of profeminist fatherhood,” and the significance of *Ms.* magazine having placed him on the cover of their 2009 winter issue. Ellie Smeal, president of the Feminist Majority Foundation and publisher of *Ms.*, explained the magazine’s decision to feature Obama on the cover for its special inaugural issue in this way: “We wanted to tell the world that he self-identifies as a feminist and that he’s run on the strongest platform of any major party for women’s rights. And we wanted to capture both the national mood and the feminist mood of high expectations and hope for his presidency.” Quoted in *Womanist Forefathers: Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. Du Bois* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009), 193. Additional publications on the election include Zillah Eisenstein, *The Audacity of Races and Genders: A Personal and Global Story of the Obama Election* (London: Zed Books, 2009); Linda Burnham, ed., *Changing the Race: Racial Politics and the Election of Barack Obama*, Applied Research Center, October 2009. [www.arc.org](http://www.arc.org); see especially Meredith Tax, “Barack, Hillary and U.S. Feminism,” 62–71, in which she discusses the chronology of the Clinton–Obama debate among feminists and analyzes its claims.

2. Robin Morgan’s “Goodbye to All That #2,” appeared February 2, 2008, in the Women’s Media Center publication ([www.womensmediacenter.com](http://www.womensmediacenter.com)). Gloria Steinem’s

op-ed, “Women Are Never Front-Runners,” appeared in *The New York Times*, January 8, 2008, the day of the New Hampshire primary.

3. The Women’s Research & Resource Center at Spelman College was the recipient in 2008 of a major grant from the Ford Foundation to launch an endowment campaign that requires a match. A national advisory board was appointed to assist with fundraising and the first event occurred in New York City.

4. The editorial includes the attendees and their institutional affiliations at the time of the New York gathering at the home of Gloria Steinem.

5. The 1848 Seneca Falls Convention, most of whose participants were White female abolitionists, signaled the beginning of the women’s movement in the U.S. Frederick Douglass, outspoken abolitionist and women’s rights advocate, was the lone Black in attendance. In 1866, the American Equal Rights Association (AERA) was founded to obtain the vote for Black men and all women. Later in the year at an Albany meeting, Douglass, one of the vice presidents, warned the AERA that it was in danger of becoming a women’s rights association only. The debate over the 15th Amendment to the Constitution precipitated a major split within the women’s movement. At the 1869 meeting of the AERA in New York, the famous debate between Douglass and White suffragists occurred during which he argued for the greater urgency of race over gender. He believed it was the Negro’s hour and that women’s rights could wait because linking woman suffrage to Negro suffrage at that point would seriously reduce the chances of securing the ballot for Black men, and Douglass reiterated, the ballot was urgent because it was a matter of life and death. Following the meeting, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony organized the women-only National Woman Suffrage Association because they believed male leaders had betrayed their interests. In 1869 in Cleveland, the American Woman Suffrage Association was organized with Lucy Stone as chair. Unfortunately, racist arguments surfaced on the part of White suffragists surrounding the passage of the 15th Amendment granting Black male suffrage, but excluding all women from voting. Allusions to this saga and the ways in which racism and sexism get ranked or privileged have occurred among Black and White feminists during acrimonious debates about Obama versus Clinton in the 2008 presidential campaign.

6. Invited by Director Susan Neiman, an avid Obama supporter originally from Atlanta, Georgia, the day-long workshop included Walter Benn Michaels (“The Post-Race Card”); Diane McWhorter (“It’s Not About Race”: White People’s Moral Alibis”); Perry Anderson (“Race, Gender, and Family: U.S. and European Contests Compared”); and Susan Neiman (“Why the Civil Rights Movement Really Isn’t About Race”); I spoke about “Race, Gender and the Presidential Primary” during the morning session.

7. Panelists included Ellen Bravo, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee; Martha Burk, *Ms.* magazine; and Courtney Elizabeth Martin, *Feministing*, who is included in the anthology.