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Privileges and Stereotypes: A Commentary

Patricia A. Cain*

I. INTRODUCTION

The theme of this panel is privilege and stereotype, two concepts that are inextricably intertwined. Whiteness, maleness, and heterosexuality are privileged in our society. Professor Devon Carbado, in his contribution to this Symposium,¹ explores the privilege of maleness and heterosexuality in black antiracist discourse. In doing so, he focuses on the centrality of a powerful stereotype in the black liberation movement: the black male victim of a racist criminal justice system.² Professor Lisa Ikemoto, in her contribution,³ explores an unusual criminal case to uncover some interesting information about the creation of a fictional Asian female, Velma, who is stereotypically sexually available and subservient.⁴ I will comment first on Professor Carbado's Essay and then turn to Professor Ikemoto's.

II. DEVON CARBADO ON PRIVILEGE

Devon Carbado has written an interesting Essay in which he reflects on the marginalization of black female and black gay perspectives in black antiracist discourse. Why, he asks, is black male victimhood always at the center of attention in debates about racism?⁵ Why was the black community so ready to view O.J. Simpson as a victim of a racist criminal justice system, when the facts also indicated that he had abused his wife? Why does black antiracist discourse ignore gender issues? A simple answer might be that all communities, even the black community, are constituted in a patriarchal fashion, such that non-masculine participants (all women and gay men) are rendered either invisible or marginal. But Carbado is not interested in simple answers. Even when he suggests that the existence of a universal overarching patriarchal system is a partial answer,⁶ he questions the way in which black men participate in that system.

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1. Devon W. Carbado, *Men in Black*, 3 J. GENDER RACE & JUST. 427 (2000).

2. *Id.* at Part II.

3. Lisa C. Ikemoto, *Male Fraud*, 3 J. GENDER RACE & JUST. 511 (2000).

4. *Id.* at Part II.

5. See Carbado, *supra* note 1, at 433-33.

6. See *id.* at Part III.

Carbado's Essay never really answers any of the questions he raises. In his own words, his purpose is "to offer four explanations for the gendered and heterosexist nature of Black antiracist discourse . . ." ⁷ He says, and I agree, that this is important to explore. He hopes that such an exploration will provide us with useful insights into how other marginalized groups are treated in other identity-based movements. Thus, for example, the way in which the black civil rights movement, dominated by black men and focused on black male victimhood, responds to the claims of black women and black gay men should tell us something useful about tensions in the women's movement between nongay white women, nongay women of color, and all gay women. Similarly, a better understanding of the gender and sexual identity tensions in the black civil rights movement should tell us something about the gender and race divides in the lesbian and gay movement.

I believe such comparisons are useful, provided one remains attentive to the important differences between race, gender, and sexuality. By warning that we stay attuned to differences, I do not mean to suggest that the three attributes are mutually exclusive. To do so would ignore the reality of individual persons who experience all attributes in a single coherent personality, e.g., the black lesbian. Nor do I mean to suggest that the differences result in three separate systems of oppression: racism, sexism, and heterosexism. In some instances, race may appear to be the dominant concern. In others, gender may appear dominant. However, a more accurate description of most examples of domination would reveal elements of all "isms."

Consider, for example, the prevalent image of black men as rapists of white women. The stereotype is powerful. People both believe it and rally against it. White men use the stereotype to dominate black men. Nevertheless, the stereotype is not just racist. It also contains sexist stereotypes in that it portrays men as aggressors, as persons who express their freedom and independence by sexually dominating women. The stereotype also touches on the image of women as victims of male aggression, as subservient and sexually available. In addition, the stereotype constructs all black men as heterosexual. Black antiracist discourse focuses only on the racist implications of this stereotype. But I believe one of the reasons the stereotype is so powerful is because it connects with so many forms of domination.

Black feminists have attacked the sexist trappings of black antiracist discourse for years. ⁸ Carbado questions why these attacks appear to have fallen on deaf ears. If we can begin to understand why black men cannot hear black

7. *Id.* at 428.

8. See, e.g., BELL HOOKS, *AIN'T I A WOMAN: BLACK WOMEN AND FEMINISM* 87-118 (1981) (discussing black male sexism and its relationship to and development out of antiracist discourse in American history); Kathleen Neal Cleaver, *Racism, Civil Rights, and Feminism*, in *CRITICAL RACE FEMINISM: A READER* 35, 36-40 (Adrien Katherine Wing ed., 1997) (analyzing the subordination of women within the civil rights movement).

women, if we can understand how their male privilege works within the movement for black liberation, then we can begin to ask similar questions about the role of white privilege in the women's movement and in the gay and lesbian movement.

If Carbado's focus in this Essay is part of a larger project, which I am sure it is,⁹ then I would like to offer some additional questions for him to think about as he considers the relationships between race, gender, and sexuality, and the privileged position of each within movements for social change. My questions focus not only on the issue of privilege, as it is mediated in movements for social change, but also on the difference between social change movements, and what those differences may tell us about privilege.

Question #1: How much influence do outsider dominant groups have on identity-based movements?

Carbado appears to assume, at least in this Essay, that civil rights movements are co-extensive with identity groups. In other words, when he talks about the black civil rights movement or the participants in black antiracist discourse, I have the distinct impression that he is envisioning black people and only black people as the participants. I may be wrong about this for nowhere does he explicitly state that this is his assumption. Instead he passively talks about discussions that people generally engage in while discussing an antiracist discourse that focuses on black men. He does not say that only black men, who are at fault for silencing (or at least not hearing) black women and gays, carry out the discussions or discourse. But, when he focuses on the heterosexual black male, who is "not confronted with . . . [having] to choose between being a man and being Black, or between being Black and being heterosexual,"¹⁰ I conclude that it is the black male discussant and activist he has had in mind throughout.

Civil rights activism, however, is only successful when it makes alliances with people outside the class that is subject to discrimination. Civil rights organizations, within which race, gender and sexuality are mediated, include both insiders and outsiders. For example, the NAACP was founded in 1909 by a biracial group of people, including Oswald Garrison Villard, president of the *New York Evening Post*.¹¹ The impetus for the founding of the NAACP was the

9. See, e.g., BLACK MEN ON RACE, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY: A CRITICAL READER (Devon W. Carbado ed., 1999).

10. Carbado, *supra* note 1, at 437.

11. See RICHARD KLUGER, SIMPLE JUSTICE 97 (1975). Oswald Garrison Villard was a very wealthy and powerful man at the time. *Id.* He was also the son of William Lloyd Garrison, a prominent abolitionist. *Id.*; see also MARK V. TUSHNET, THE NAACP'S LEGAL STRATEGY AGAINST SEGREGATED EDUCATION, 1925-1950, at 1 (1987).

group's concern about violence against black men.¹² Its initial top ranking officers were all white men except for one black man—Professor W.E.B. Du Bois.¹³ The funding for its most prolonged legal battle against segregated education came from a fund established by a white Harvard undergraduate, Charles Garland, who had just inherited a substantial sum from his father.¹⁴ While I certainly do not mean to suggest that the NAACP is the black civil rights movement, I cite this brief history of its formation to suggest that the movement began with crucial support of well-placed white men. Thus, from the beginning, the movement was shaped by dominant forces, albeit ones that were critical of the reigning racist views of the majority of the country. Strong and long-term support of an identity-based movement by outsider dominant groups is likely to affect the dynamics of the movement, including the attitudes of its insiders on gender and sexual identity issues. Those in leadership positions will make key decisions about organizational issues and movement strategies. In the black liberation movement, violence against black men was a powerful focus in the movement's early days.¹⁵ White and black men united against racism and together they constructed a view of black liberation, rooted in a history of patriarchal assumptions.

What this observation suggests is that the modern women's liberation movement may be less at risk. Second wave feminists formed new organizations whose histories do not include significant or long-term involvement of the most dominant group in society: powerful, white, nongay men.¹⁶ Indeed, in the 1970s, when groups such as the Playboy Foundation offered funds to feminist organizations, many organizations rejected the funds to avoid even the appearance of being co-opted.¹⁷ Within the women's movement, the dominance of white nongay women has been the problem.¹⁸ A relevant question that Carbado should be asking is: Why is it that the women's

12. See TUSHNET, *supra* note 11, at 1. Tushnet describes the concern more generally as one about "white violence against blacks," another example of the gender presumption at work. *Id.* The initial organizational meeting of the NAACP occurred in response to a story about a race riot in Springfield, Illinois. KLUGER, *supra* note 11, at 96-97. For a description of the event and the organizational meeting, see *id.* at 96-98.

13. See KLUGER, *supra* note 11, at 98.

14. *Id.* at 132.

15. TUSHNET, *supra* note 11, at 1.

16. See FLORA DAVIS, *MOVING THE MOUNTAIN: THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN AMERICA SINCE 1960*, at 109, 142 (1999) (describing how men, and even male reporters, were not welcome in some feminist group meetings).

17. See THOMAS WEYR, *REACHING FOR PARADISE* 241 (1978) (describing the National Organization of Women's (NOW) refusal to receive funds from *Playboy*).

18. See generally DAVIS, *supra* note 16, at 356-84 (describing the recent struggle to incorporate the interests of historically excluded groups within the women's movement).

movement has been more ready to deal with racial issues than the black civil rights movement has been willing to confront gender issues?¹⁹

Question #2: How does the gay and lesbian civil rights movement stack up against the black civil rights movement on the question of gender?

Black people come in at least two genders, male and female.²⁰ Gay people similarly come in at least two genders. The black civil rights movement has been criticized, primarily by black feminists, for its patriarchal attitudes.²¹ Lesbian feminists of various races have similarly criticized the gay and lesbian civil rights movement.²² If the gay movement has addressed its sexist problems better than the black movement has, which I believe to be true, then an interesting question for Carbado to pursue would be: why? The question seems especially interesting because the gay movement is a predominantly white movement. Patriarchy is often identified as part of white dominance. Patriarchy is certainly not a special creation of black culture. So, why have white gay

19. I do not mean to suggest that the women's movement immediately embraced racial concerns or even that it has resolved differences and tensions. I only mean to suggest that feminists have made more progress on race than the black civil rights movement has made on gender.

20. *But see generally* Patricia A. Cain, *Stories from the Gender Garden: Transsexuals and Antidiscrimination Law*, 75 DENV. U. L. REV. 1321 (1998) (arguing that there may be more than two genders).

21. *See* Carbado, *supra* note 1, at 428; BELLHOOKS, *YEARNING: RACE, GENDER, AND CULTURAL POLITICS* 57-64 (1990).

22. *See, e.g.,* Audre Lorde, *I Am Your Sister: Black Women Organizing Across Sexualities, in MAKING FACE, MAKING SOUL: HACIENDA CARAS: CREATIVE AND CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES BY WOMEN OF COLOR* 321, 324 (Gloria Anzaldúa ed., 1990) (examining homophobia within the black community as a function of women's oppression while suggesting strategies of resistance and coalition in and between racial and sexual identities); Adrienne Rich, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence, in ADRIENNE RICH'S POETRY AND PROSE* 203, 217-18 (Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi & Albert Gelpi eds., 1993). Rich writes:

Lesbians have historically been deprived of political existence through "inclusion" as female versions of male homosexuality. . . . Part of the history of lesbian existence is . . . to be found . . . [in] common cause with homosexual men. But there are differences: women's lack of economic and cultural privilege relative to men; . . . the term *gay* may serve the purpose of blurring the very outlines we need to discern, which are of crucial value for feminism and for the freedom of women as a group.

Id. (emphasis in original); *see also* Yolanda Chávez Leyva, *Breaking the Silence: Putting Latina Lesbian History at the Center, in UNEQUAL SISTERS: A MULTICULTURAL READER IN U.S. WOMEN'S HISTORY* 403, 407 (Vicki Ruiz & Ellen Carol DuBois eds., 3d ed. 2000) (asserting that Latina lesbians "have declared their unwillingness to deny any one part of their ethnic, gender, and sexual identities" despite the marginalization of women within Latino cultural nationalism, and explaining that this "conscious effort to embrace all the separate parts of identity is a hallmark of gay and lesbian political organizing within communities of color"); Jill Johnston, *Woman Prime, in COMING OUT: AN ANTHOLOGY OF INTERNATIONAL GAY AND LESBIAN WRITINGS* 173, 174-75 (Stephan Likosky ed., 1992) ("The lesbian has experienced male prejudice within gay liberation and heterosexual fear within women's liberation.").

activists been more successful in overcoming sexism than have black civil rights activists? The answer, I suspect, has something to do with the link between gender and sexual identity. If the black civil rights movement could overcome its heterosexism, as of course the gay civil rights movement has done, then it might be in a better position to deal with its sexism. In any event, a closer look at the relationships between gender and race and sexuality within all civil rights movements that deal with these issues would be an interesting project. Although such a project may require some factual investigations, I believe the inquiry would tie in nicely with Professor Carbado's critical form of theorizing.

III. LISA IKEMOTO ON STEREOTYPES

Simone de Beauvoir got it right: One is not born a woman, one is made a woman.²³ "Woman" is a stereotype, socially constructed, not derived from nature. Lisa Ikemoto tells us a fascinating story in her Essay, *Male Fraud*, of the making of a particular "woman," a stereotypical Asian female. Christopher Barnes, of unknown gender, race, and sexual orientation, is the creator of "Velma," the Single Asian Female (SAF), who desires to meet men.²⁴ More precisely, Barnes is one of the participants in an ongoing discourse that created "Velma." As Professor Ikemoto points out, "stereotypes are not simply presented and accepted, but are discursive."²⁵ I take this to mean that the participants in the discourse create stereotypes. de Beauvoir would add that women participate in the discourse that creates the stereotypical woman.²⁶ Modern day commentators in support of de Beauvoir would mention hegemony and the participation of the oppressed in their own oppression.²⁷ But, in the mail fraud scheme devised by Barnes, only men participated in the creation of "Velma" (assuming, that is, that Barnes is a man—for we are nowhere told his gender—but can only assume he was male, and assuming that Barnes acted alone).

23. SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR, *THE SECOND SEX* 267 (H.M. Parshley ed. & trans., 1952).

24. Ikemoto, *supra* note 3, at 514.

25. *Id.* at 517.

26. *See, e.g.*, DE BEAUVOIR, *supra* note 23, at 404-713 (outlining the psychological dimensions of select female stereotypes and explaining the identity function they serve for women who internalize and adopt them).

27. *See, e.g.*, JUDITH BUTLER, *GENDER TROUBLE: FEMINISM AND THE SUBVERSION OF IDENTITY* (1991) (highlighting and exploring the performance aspect of sexual identity and asserting that the self is constructed out of dominant ideological forces); PAULO FREIRE, *THE PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED* (1970) (arguing that revolutionary change, political and personal, is only possible once the individual's participation and investment in social structures as they exist is uncovered and dismantled).

The plan was for “Velma” to entice male correspondents, to seduce them, and finally to milk them for money. She did not blackmail her victims.²⁸ She merely enticed them into forwarding her money that she either needed for her business or planned to invest on behalf of her victims.²⁹

A. Victims and Villains

Perhaps we should worry about the Christopher Barnes of the world—men (presumably) who prey on other men by using a stereotypical woman as bait. But Barnes is not the real villain. Barnes created a scam by plugging into an existing market of men who needed to feel dominant vis-à-vis a woman. These men sought out a submissive Asian female to make that feeling of dominance possible. If they had not found “Velma,” they would have found someone else in the legitimate market of SAFs. In a sense, the government must prosecute Barnes to protect alternative markets in Asian female sexuality and objectification, markets in which American male consumers can legitimately trade.

Ikemoto’s comparison of the government’s concerns in the *Barnes* case with the government’s action in amending the immigration laws to prevent marriage fraud is chilling.³⁰ At the hearings and floor debates on the Immigration Marriage Fraud Amendment (IMFA), Congressmen and an Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) Commissioner spoke of the problems created for American men by mail order brides.³¹ The IMFA was enacted to address the problematic practice of mail order brides.³² The INS Commissioner described the law as it existed before the amendments were enacted: “The law does not presently require that these fiances have ever met. Thus United States citizens legitimately petition for ‘mail order brides’, advertised in the backs of magazines and tabloids sold at the checkout lines of supermarkets.”³³ The INS’s concern, its reason for pushing for a change in the law, was not that women were being victimized and needed governmental help to free them from unwanted commodification. Rather, the INS and Congress were concerned about the poor American male who might be victimized when he discovers that the presumptively submissive alien gal does not want to be his

28 Cf. JOHN GRISHAM, *THE BROTHERS* (2000) (telling the story of three incarcerated judges who create new identities through a letter writing scheme to extort prominent men). Grisham’s plot differs from that of Barnes only in that the victims are closeted gay men and the seduction turns ugly when the letter writers demand blackmail money. *Id.* At least “Velma” never really blackmailed anyone.

29. Ikemoto, *supra* note 3, at 515.

30. *Id.* at Part IV.

31. *Id.* at 535-36.

32. *Id.* at 533-36.

33. *Id.* at 539 n.153.

wife after all. In the government's view, the "purchaser" who has been abandoned by his "purchase" is the victim. The act of purchasing is viewed as unproblematic.

Identifying the government's actual concern helps to explain the remedy that Congress enacted to deal with the problem of mail order brides. Congress did not ban the commodification of women through the IMFA. Rather, Congress gave more power to the American male "purchaser" by withholding legal permanent resident status from the bride for a conditional period of two years.³⁴ During this period, the bride must keep her husband happy, otherwise he will be unlikely to file the required joint petition to change her status. Thus, using the image of the scheming and duplicitous foreign *femme fatale*, Congress managed to enact legislation aimed at protecting her potential male victims.

Similarly, the Postal Inspectors go after "Velma" to protect the male victims.³⁵ The men have done nothing wrong in wishing to purchase her. Thus, they are the ones most deserving of governmental protection. You and I, as readers of Ikemoto's essay, know that "Velma" does not exist. However, her victims do not know that. Apparently, the Postal Inspectors were sufficiently concerned about their victims that they withheld from them evidence that the person they were going after was not really the stereotypical Asian woman the men had pursued. In this way, the government maintained the negative stereotype of the scheming and duplicitous *femme fatale* and allowed the victims to continue to blame "Velma" for seducing them and taking their money. Thus, the true villains in Ikemoto's story are the governmental forces, including the INS, Congress, and the Postal Inspector Service that become complicit in maintaining negative sexist stereotypes in order to protect men who want to dominate women.

B. Who Is Christopher Barnes?

One cannot help wanting to ask at the end of Professor Ikemoto's story: Who is Christopher Barnes? Does he fit any type of stereotype? Ikemoto carefully and intentionally removes all traces of his possible identity when she tells his story. She succeeded so well that I conjured up no concept, no image, and no imagined face at any time in my reading of the Essay, thereby perhaps proving her point that "the use and formation of a stereotype is inherently collaborative."³⁶ With no help from the author, this reader failed to form a stereotype on her own.

34. *Id.* at 534.

35. Ikemoto, *supra* note 3, at 530-33.

36. *Id.* at 519.

Nevertheless, the absence of information only made me more curious. So I tried to imagine who he might be when I finished reading the Essay. Would it have to be someone who understood what SAFs might say in their most intimate sexual correspondence? Or, alternatively, would it have to be someone who so well understood the macho-identified³⁷ yet needy men who were to be hooked by this letter-writing scheme? Then I remembered. At the Symposium, when Professor Ikemoto first presented her paper, we all wondered about Barnes as well. Someone asked about him: Who was he? Was he really male? What was his race? When I finished rereading the Essay this most recent time, I called Professor Ikemoto to verify: Was he really male? What was his race?

As best we know, Christopher Barnes is an African-American male, and presumably nongay. For some reason, I find that information completely unhelpful. That information does not help me with any of the images I tried to conjure up on my own. Why not? And what does that tell me about stereotyping?

37. I use the word macho to describe my understanding of the men's construction of themselves. See *id.* at 525-26 (describing the photos of the men in military uniform or fishing gear).

