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No Longer the World's Mule: Black Women in the Age of Michelle Obama

by

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***Writer's reflections:** I faced two problems in writing this piece. One was keeping myself from panicking because, although I had a general idea of what I wanted to write about—the impact of Michelle Obama on today's black woman—I wasn't settled with the story. I didn't know if I would be able to offer anything new to this topic that, in some form or another, hasn't been written about since Michelle's husband threw his hat into the 2008 presidential election. Because I was writing the article to be included in a three piece portfolio for my final class in the Master's of Professional Writing program at Chatham University, I quickly pulled together interviews and research and wrestled it all into a rough draft to be submitted by the deadline.*

My second problem occurred during revision. The feedback on my draft challenged my decision to exclude non-black women from the article, plus I needed to incorporate more information about the first lady into the text. The inclusion of race in my work is an issue I have faced in all three of my master degree programs. In each program most of my classmates were white, which means that the curriculums, the textbooks, the lecture materials were not inclusive of my history as a black woman. Ironically, Michelle Obama wrote about the "...biased curricula which does not encourage...the contribution of blacks, the study of blacks, as a group" in her undergraduate thesis. So, it was the expansion of my research to include a review of Obama's thesis that helped me with my substance problem and settled my resolve to highlight only black women in this piece.

It was the late African American writer Zora Neale Hurston who said, “The black woman is the mule of the world.” At the height of her career during the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston wrote about the hard times black women suffered inside and outside of the home. The award-winning author of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston experienced firsthand the struggle of being black and female when she was criticized by black, male writers for focusing on women in her writing and when she was grossly undercompensated for her writing efforts. Hurston died destitute at the age of sixty-nine even though she was college educated and successful in her career.

It can be said that the road black women walk in the twenty-first century is much improved. Michelle Obama, the first African American First Lady of the United States of America, is a shining example of just how far black women have come. But is Mrs. Obama the exception or the new rule? Are African American women seizing opportunities to improve their station in life or are they continuing to settle for traveling the rough road that, historically, many black women have had no choice but to follow? Are African American women redefining their position in society from that of the world’s mule to the world’s new major contributors to the global community?

A Model Representative

As an African American woman from a working class background, Obama is the living example of how far education and hard work can take a woman. For black women, Obama is the model image of a strong woman, a supportive wife, and a loving mother.

“I believe that she allows all black women to hold their heads up higher and proclaim their rightful place in society.” Michelle Brown, a single mother with a three-year-old son living

in Atlanta, Georgia, expressed the pride that the very sight of the first lady elicits from so many African American women.

Obama's upbringing in a working class family on the South Side of Chicago is the basis for much of the admiration that black women hold for the first lady. She looks like the average black woman and her life is familiar to them. Obama's accomplishments, including degrees from Princeton University and Harvard Law School, have inspired African American women to make major changes in their lives.

Caught in the chaos of the recession of the last two years, Brown was laid off from her administrative assistant position after ten years of service. Having already made the decision to return to school while employed, Brown entered an accelerated bachelor's degree one month after being laid-off. Her personal drive and determination to chart her own course have allowed Brown to not only survive, but thrive in this economy. Brown understands that not all black women are so secure in their ability to make strides whether the going is good or the bottom has fallen out from under them.

"Although I saw being laid-off as an opportunity to prepare for my future, there are many women of color [who] may not see that same opportunity. There are many women who allow their own self-talk to 'block their blessings,' Brown noted. "Negative self-talk is profound; it will stop you cold in your tracks. It will keep you from reaching your highest potential in life."

Brown's attitude is the result of a life devoted to self-empowerment and freedom from past self-esteem issues, which is evident in her ability to sustain her family during trying times. This positive approach to adversity is often missing from the repertoire of black women who have traditionally fallen at the very bottom of the totem pole of society as Hurston alludes to in her famous quote. Many black women continue to struggle with low self-esteem. It is a battle

that has been waged by black women for many years. And just as Michelle Obama has emerged as a major figure in the improvement of the black woman's image, historically, African American women like Hurston and others have worked towards the aim of transforming how black women view themselves.

The Battle to Change Society's Perspective

In her book, *Visionary Black Feminist: A Critical Introduction*, Vivian M. May examined the contribution of African American writer and feminist activist Anna Julia Cooper. Cooper was outspoken in her views regarding the role black women should be allowed to play in society.

Cooper, who lived from 1858-1964, was a proponent of black women being assertive in their personal and work lives. She pressed the importance of education and the opportunity for black women to earn a living wage that would, in essence, afford them independence and personal freedom. May, an assistant professor of Women's and Gender Studies at Syracuse University, noted Cooper's clear and adamant focus on black women taking hold of their lives outside of the bondage of marriage and the general patriarchal society.

"In her writing, she makes an intensive argument for black women's education because education releases women from dependency on marriage for meeting their basic needs, from relational roles defined primarily by their capacity to please or worship men, and from artificial confinement in the home when they have so much to offer the world around them (p. 130)." May also presented Cooper's strong belief in the contributions all women have to offer the global community.

In her undergraduate thesis, Obama opened her evaluation of the impact of attending an Ivy League school on the way blacks function in black and white society with a dedication that

provides insight into the foundation that helped propel her to her current station in life. “To Mom, Dad, Craig, and all of my special friends: Thank you for loving me and always making me feel good about myself (p. iv).” Obama’s self-esteem was obviously nurtured, giving her the personal power to pursue educational goals and to gain high profile positions as the Executive Director of Public Allies and Vice President of Community and External Affairs at the University of Chicago, among others.

It is personal resolve like Obama displays that enabled black women to endure the brutality of slavery and the inequity that continues almost one hundred and fifty years after the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. Women like Cooper and author Zora Neal Hurston opposed the misogynistic beliefs that a woman’s purpose is to serve men and manage households, but not to offer their minds and hearts and backs to the betterment of humankind.

Journalist Khadija Sharife reported in her October 2008 article, “The Black Female in Modern History,” on the tradition of women being reduced to commodities or sex objects. This dehumanized imagery is the basis for much of the violence and overall mistreatment of women. Sharife pointed out that, when women do manage to succeed, they are still not fully recognized for their accomplishments. “If and when strong, assertive and educated females surface,” Sharife stated, “they are viewed as exceptional, and by default, ‘manly’ in their accomplishment of tasks often reserved for and occupied by males; this naturally lends the interpretation that success lies on the domain of maleness and women are by nature inferior (p. 12).”

The Power of Women’s Work

With women currently representing half of the American workforce and, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, increasing their college enrollment numbers by 27%

from 1995-2005, there appears to be a feminization of American culture underway. And black women, who have always been a part of the workforce in large numbers and who are now outpacing black men in the completion of bachelor degrees, are playing a formidable role in this charge. Many black women are transforming their image from slave and mule to achiever. As the great-great-great granddaughter of a former slave named Melvinia Shields, Obama is the fruit that Shields' uncompensated work on a plantation in South Carolina and later on a farm in Georgia, ultimately bore.

The harvest that is Michelle Obama's life has also ignited a flame in black women who have followed the same template (education, career, and family) to push more and explore deeper the contributions they currently make.

Pamela Spears is a married, working mother of two teenagers. She acknowledges a call to action that is a direct result of the first lady's presence on the world scene. "Watching Michelle Obama function in the circles she does has really inspired and motivated me to step out to do and try my hand at some new areas I want to explore in my personal and professional life."

This shift in consciousness included a new recognition of the importance of her work as an administrative assistant in a law library during the current recession. "Because I perform in an accounts payable function, I will say that my role has become more important because I assist in watching all the bills, making sure amounts are correct and that we are not being over charged. Also, assisting my boss directly with materials for our budget is a crucial role I play."

Although Spears is happy with her job and has a financially stable household, she aspires to do more and plans to enter a master's program in Christian counseling in the fall of 2010. As a

professional black woman, Pamela is clear on the importance of women furthering their education and gaining greater ground in the workforce; but, she is also aware of the problems that may occur when a black woman is focused on self-improvement.

“I think the number of black women in college can have both a positive and negative effect on society and the black community. Positive in that it shows all women that you can go to college regardless of what obstacles you face. The negative impact I see,” Spears continued, “...is that a black woman going to college can cause a divide between black women and black men who are not on the same level. The black man tends to feel intimidated by a black educated woman that knows more and makes more money than he does. This does and can continue to cause relationship problems; therefore, affecting black families as a whole.”

While Spears is confident in the solidarity of her nearly two decade old marriage to a supportive, professional black man, her perspective on the frailty of black male-female relationships when the woman is educated and more than gainfully employed, is common in the black community. What is inspiring, though, are the similarities in the relationships that Spears and Obama have with their husbands. Both women are encouraged by their spouses to strive for bigger goals. With a history of broken marriages and children raised in single parent homes, the visual image of Obama with her husband and two young daughters is validation to black women with intact families and encouragement to single black women that a life in a cohesive, supportive relationship with a black man is indeed possible without surrendering one's dreams.

Overcoming the Obstacles to Success

While Spears surrounds herself with women who strive for better, more fulfilling lives, she does agree that many black women are not being proactive in advancing their status in life.

She noted that “ignorance, lack of funds, low self-esteem, and laziness” are reasons that more black women are not doing better for themselves.

It is true that low-self esteem and lack of knowledge of opportunities paired with poor motivation hinder black women from moving forward in their lives, Spears’ reference to a lack of funds is, indeed, a huge burden on the lives of many African American women. Poverty can stop a black woman primed to embark on the now sufficiently worn and cleared road to success dead in her tracks.

According to the Institute for Women’s Policy Research, “in no state do women fare as well economically as men.” As a collective, women, black women in particular, continue to have many mountains to climb before reaching equality in education, work, and money. But, with women gaining ground in the boardrooms of fortune 500 companies and in the halls of academia, it is clear that women in general are on their way to re-writing the script of womanhood that has been traditionally penned by men. But for black women, there remains the issue of race.

Obama addressed the issue of blackness in her 1985 undergraduate thesis, which became a controversial and eagerly sought after document during her husband’s presidential campaign.

My experiences at Princeton have made me far more aware of my “Blackness” than ever before. I have found that at Princeton no matter how liberal and open-minded some of my White professors and classmates try to be toward me, I sometimes feel like a visitor on campus; as if I really don’t belong (p. 2).

Even taking into consideration the privilege that her Ivy League education would eventually afford her, Obama remained weary of her ability to transcend the boundaries of race:

These experiences have made it apparent to me that the path I have chosen to follow by attending Princeton will likely lead to my further integration and/or assimilation into a White culture and social structure that will only allow me to remain on the periphery of Society; never becoming a full participant (p. 2-3).

Obama's words speak to the component of the black woman's plight that will take longer to change: exclusion. The black woman's struggle, her life, and her story have never been given the attention that other groups in American society have received. That is, until now.

Michelle Obama is transforming the image of black women on the national and global levels, but average black women are also making significant contributions. They are doing their part to hold up America's weak economy and warming a large percentage of the seats in the country's college classrooms. In this historic period in American culture, Black women are actively redefining how they are perceived by the global community and more importantly, how they view themselves.

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