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Michelle Obama is a role model, though maybe not a feminist one

Mariam Williams | Nov. 18, 2013 At the Intersection

In the comments to my previous post on Christianity and Black Power [1], someone asked me, "What's your reaction to the way Michelle Obama performs being a black woman and mother?" The reader has great admiration for the first lady but said she also could "see a certain feminist critique that she seems to have believed that she had to pretend to leave her brain behind before entering the White House in order to help the first black President be a success."

I share the reader's adoration [2] for the first lady, but I also see -- and have made, but not in writing -- a feminist critique similar to the one the reader is aware of. It's not that I think Michelle Obama believed she had to check her brain at the White House lawn to help her husband. I think she -- or someone -- saw fit that she erase her history of success.

Intelligence and success are different animals when it comes to the intersection of race and gender roles. If Mrs. Obama appeared to be stupid or uneducated, she wouldn't have the hearts of millions of black people because stupidity would fall into a negative stereotype of blackness, and part of the reason she is so loved is because she defies those stereotypes. I know I'm not the only one [3] who gets tired of seeing black women depicted as brainless buxom bodies for videos, ghetto chicks with attitudes, lazy welfare queens, and fat women who would choose their hair over their health. Michelle Obama represents the majority of black women I know: college-educated, poised, professional and health-conscience women you would also have to pull from the dance floor at a wedding reception.

And yet that word "represents" is fully loaded. As if there wasn't enough tied into being married to the most powerful man in the world, she is also the first first lady to have the added complication of being African-American. When a person of color is the only person in the room clearly of her race or ethnicity, she is expected to represent and speak for everyone else who may share her hue or other physical features. It's also the expectation when that person is a first. Whatever Michelle Obama does is what every future African-American first lady will do, and if her words or actions fit into a stereotype of black women, it's also what every black woman does or will do. If it doesn't fit, she's probably an exception, so the logic goes.

Pause on the stereotypes above and consider a new scenario. Let's say Michelle Obama decided to follow another first lady's footsteps and enter the White House as a nontraditional wife. As a first lady who wanted a seat at the policy table, Hillary Clinton was hated. If Michelle Obama were to have the same desire, people, especially critics of all things Obama, would default to the domineering, emasculating, so-strong-she-makes-marriage-impossible-and-family-life-dysfunctional black woman of the Moynihan report. Black feminists have long theorized that the 1965 state-sponsored report, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action [4]," led black men to push black women to the kitchen in black nationalist organizations, and some might say black people have been reacting to it ever since.

I believe it produces an enormous sense of pride for black people to see a black woman both able to fulfill a traditional wife's role and presumably choosing to do so. Her husband has the most powerful job in the world. Work outside the home will never again be a necessity for her. Her labor will never be forced, and in this way,

she epitomizes black freedom.

Not since Cliff and Clair Huxtable have a black man and woman represented such a complete restoration of the black family, but Michelle takes a step away from Clair. The latter was superwoman. She mothered five perfect children while looking flawless and winning cases as a litigator. Michelle's professional background disappeared at the 2012 Democratic National Convention. She met her husband at a law firm, where he came to work as her intern. That was cute in 2008, but with a second term at stake, that was gone. I don't why strategists saw fit to omit that portion of her life, but as a feminist, I noticed, and it saddened me. I also didn't see the point in a presidential race so contingent upon understanding women. She could have been the voice for professional women who wanted to maintain control over their bodies and careers by planning their families. But I think the specter of the Moynihan report's "Black matriarchy" -- which was really a highly functional community-based system the white patriarchy labeled "deviant" -- looms over even the most powerful black family in the world.

At the same time, I have to acknowledge mothering two girls in the media circus that is their lives deserves every second the first lady can give it. I also have to admit I was thrilled to have the guy I was dating at the time call me after her speech and say, "I want someone to talk about me like Michelle talks about Barack." Professional black success stories aren't the only ones I want to see.

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