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June 25, 2008

Michelle Obama, a Womanist Woman

Unfortunately, all too often we think in stereotypes.

All too often we have a set of conventional and rigid categories for people, and when we meet someone we want to put them into a category, thinking, mistakenly, that now we know what to expect.

Western civilization since the Enlightenment has categorized African-American women into a few categories often built upon the presumption that the "Negro" is, by definition, "strangers to every sentiment of compassion and are an awful example of the corruption of man when left to himself" (from the definition of "Negro" Encyclopaedia Britannica 1798). We may think that this definition no longer holds in the minds of most intelligent people, however, it is clear from many signals both subtle and obvious that people of African descent still struggle against a perception of inferiority.

Also, whenever we interpret the text of woman, the subtext is sex – availability and competition. This is also true of the text of the African-American woman. An exploration of this issue is beyond the scope of this essay; however, let us consider some of the old stereotypes of blackwoman. Perhaps the oldest and most enduring is Mammy, earth mother, fat black woman who nurtures white children while her own children are invisible. Black Vixen, the woman who uses her sexuality to catch and trap men, to make her way through the world. The welfare mother, aka welfare queen, the bitches and hos of Hip-Hop are understood as this type. Sapphire, the hardworking competent African-American woman who is constantly scolding some lazy black man; she is at war with her man. The Black revolutionary sister; she is hard; she is gun toting with a fist in the air; she is at war with the world; she is

an angry blackwoman. The tragic mulatto is the beautiful mixed race woman who can find no home in either the black or white worlds.

Today we have other less well-worn categories – the amazon athlete, think the Rutgers Women’s Basketball Team . In tennis, the Williams sisters infuse this category with unparalleled power, skill, style and grace. There is the too cool cerebral scholar, think Condoleezza Rice. Then there is the diva who stands on stage—the queens and high priestesses of song, Aretha Franklin, Patti Labelle, Cassandra Wilson and others and their young ladies in waiting, Mary J. Blige, Beyonce, Alicia Keys, and Lizz Wright.

Enter Michelle Obama.

None of these categories suit her, thus many people in white America are living through a cognitive dissonance that leaves them struggling to find a way to think about her. She is tall, slim, elegant. She cares for her own children. No mammy here. She is married to a man who adores her and she is standing with him to help him reach his goals. She is intellectual, passionate, and accomplished in her own right. She is no vixen sapphire angry black revolutionary tragic mulatto amazon athlete too cool scholar diva. Some people want to force her into one or the other of such categories – angry, unpatriotic blackwoman or baby mama. Such attempts say nothing about who Michelle Obama is and says much about the people making such statements.

While thinking in categories is dangerous and lacks explanatory power, I want to propose another category that is more inclusive, expansive and elastic. I want to propose another way to think about Michelle Obama. Womanist.

Womanism is a term coined in the 1980s by Alice Walker. She defines a womanist as: “like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. . . Responsible. In charge, Serious. . . Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender.” A womanist loves; she is committed to the well-being of herself and others. Since the time Walker coined the term, blackwoman scholars have used this definition as a starting place for scholarly reflection. A womanist scholar understands that blackwomen stand at the nexus of several hard realities – race, class, sex, sexuality and others. Womanist scholars begin with the notion of complexity. We know the truth is deeper than what we see on the surface. People function from social, psychological, historical, cultural, economic and political wellsprings at once distant and near in time and space. Womanist scholars investigate these complexities. Womanists look for them.

Thus womanism rejects old categories that seek to both define and confine African-American women. Womanists also reject the narrow categories that confine feminists. Michelle Obama is a figure in American public life who reminds us to be wary of stale, simple and simplistic thinking about human beings in general and woman and blackwoman in particular.

Some commentary says that the Obama campaign wants to soften Michelle Obama’s image. Read turn purple into lavender. If this were possible, it would be an enormous mistake. Michelle Obama is not Jacqueline Kennedy who spoke barely above a whisper. The nation does not need a soft Michelle Obama; the nation at this moment in history needs Michelle Obama in all her womanist brilliance. The nation needs her truth that says that she has not always been proud of her country. She has tried to clarify her statement, but her husband’s political rivals have used this statement to portray her as unpatriotic. I do not presume to speak for all Womanists; I do not presume to speak for Michelle Obama. However, from my own womanist perspective I understand why she or any other American would not be proud of the United States of America. How could a thinking woman be proud

of a nation that allows the kind of urban blight that she sees daily on the south side of Chicago? How can Michelle Obama or any other person who is paying attention to the world around them be proud of a nation that perpetrates structural violence on poor black people in inner cities and upon poor white people in rural communities?

Structural violence is the systemic violence perpetrated upon communities through bad schools, bad policing, bad health care, bad economic development, and bad infrastructure maintenance. Too many Americans do not see this and thus are shocked when it comes to light. Such was the case in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans.

Further pride and love are two different things. African-American people have always loved America, but that love is not a blind love; it is not a love that forgives and forgets. It is a complex and radical love. For African-Americans, to forget the past is to dishonor our ancestors who struggled with massive injustice, with physical and psychological cruelty. We can forgive America for the sake of our mental health, but we forgive and remember. (See Thoughts on Forgiveness, a lecture at JustPeaceTheory.com) It is not a love that makes America god and Americanism a religion. It is not a love that makes "American" our ultimate identity. It is a radical love. It is a love that loves the enemy that blesses those who curse us that prays for those who persecute us. It is the love taught by Jesus, and preached by Martin Luther King Jr. and lived by womanist women such as Fannie Lou Hamer. It is a radical love sung by Sweet Honey in the Rock. It is a foundational love; we stand on it and build upon it and invite others to join us in the work of love and justice. It is a love that speaks the truth and then works with a will toward ending the structural violence perpetrated on the poor of all races.

A womanist patriotism begins with this love. It recognizes that America is our home. The bodies of our ancestors are buried in its ground, and the blood, sweat and tears of past and present generations water its soil. It is a patriotism that merges faith and hope in the same way that is expressed in the lyrics of James Weldon Johnson's "Lift Every Voice and Sing."ⁱ A womanist patriotism honors history and knows that Johnson is right: "We have come over a way that with tears has been watered; we have come treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered." A womanist patriotism also knows that Johnson is right when he writes of a bright star that lights the future. Like Johnson, a womanist patriotism looks to God, looks to the Divine, to a transcendence that is beyond America; it is a power that has brought us and that is able to keep us on the right paths, that is able to help us to stay true to Itself and true to our native land. To honor God, our ancestors, and the nation, we are compelled to work for a brighter day coming for the generations not yet born. I dare say that this is the patriotism of Michelle Obama.

So let Michelle Obama be Michelle Obama. A Womanist woman-- outrageous, audacious, courageous, loving, committed, responsible and complex.

ⁱ "Lift Every Voice and Sing" is traditionally understood as the African-American National Anthem. It can be found in most African-American church hymnals. [This Far by Faith: an African American Resource for Worship.](#) Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999.