

FROM MAMMY TO MOMMY

Michelle Obama and the Reclamation of Black Motherhood

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ON NOVEMBER 21ST, 2013, *POLITICO* MAGAZINE PUBLISHED MICHELLE COTTLE'S PIECE TITLED "LEANING OUT: HOW MICHELLE OBAMA BECAME A FEMINIST NIGHTMARE." COTTLE PINPOINTS SEVERAL EXPLANATIONS FOR OBAMA'S DEGENERATION INTO SUCH A "NIGHTMARE," INCLUDING THE FIRST LADY PROCLAIMING TO BE A "MOM-IN-CHIEF" AND FOCUSING ON HEALTHY EATING. MELISSA HARRIS-PERRY, CORRESPONDENT FOR MSNBC, RETALIATED QUICKLY AND CRITICIZED COTTLE FOR HER REMARKS, INSISTING THAT SHE SHOULD BETTER STUDY HER BLACK FEMINIST HISTORY. THIS ARTICLE ARGUES THAT COTTLE IS OBLIVIOUS TO OBAMA'S STANDPOINT AS A BLACK WOMAN, AND THAT BY EMBRACING MOTHERHOOD, OBAMA IS DOING WHAT MANY BLACK WOMEN HAVE BEEN PREVENTED FROM DOING THROUGHOUT HISTORY. THIS ARTICLE DRAWS FROM BOTH HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS OF BLACK WOMEN DURING SLAVERY AND MODERN CONSTRUCTIONS OF BLACK FEMININITY TO ADDRESS COTTLE'S CLAIMS.

Instead of being a unifying experience for women to celebrate, motherhood has actually divided women throughout history. Societal norms and conventions have constructed various versions of motherhood that have evolved with different trajectories. However, many white feminists still view motherhood through a universal lens that omits the collective and unique histories of mothers of color. Michelle Cottle's article, "Leaning Out: How Michelle Obama Became a Feminist Nightmare," demonstrates this basic lack of understanding of the differences between black and white motherhoods. Cottle pinpoints Obama's self-appointed title as "mom-in-chief" as problematic and simply exacerbates the distance between black and white feminists and their struggles to understand each other's standpoints. Melissa Harris-Perry responded scathingly to Cottle's argument and denounced her for her narrow characterization of black motherhood. The tension between Melissa Harris-Perry's and Michelle Cottle's views of Michelle Obama echoes years of distance between white and black feminisms, as white women vie to free themselves from the very domestic sphere that black women struggle to enter.

White women have a tumultuous relationship with the role of motherhood, due to white males historically manipulating white women's reproductive capabilities to ensure racial purity. Coerced into certain parameters of what the patriarchy wanted motherhood to be, white mothers had very little agency when it came to how they used their own bodies. Because white women perpetuated whiteness through their lineage, the patriarchal white supremacy institutionalized tactics to control their behavior and "instead of protecting white women according to the Southern code of chivalry, they undermined white women's cultural value and social power and isolated them within their own racial group."¹ One such tactic was the 1924 Preservation of Racial Integrity Act in Virginia, which "codified the one-drop rule by restricting white status to persons having no 'discernable trace' of non-white (Negro, Indian, or Asian) blood, which prevented near-whites from claiming the benefits of whiteness. As in most anti-miscegenation regulations, however, white women's relationships with black men were the real focus of the Act."² Subjugated and confined, some white women obviously felt natural tendencies of aggression towards the system. Cer-



MICHELLE OBAMA AT MARY'S CENTER FOR MATERNAL AND CHILD CARE IN WASHINGTON, D.C. (COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS)

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tain laws emerged that were meant to assuage the fear of deviant women who adhered to the feminist prototype of the New Woman, as scientist Francis Galton called for laws that “particularly chastised the *white*, upper-middle-class, educated New Woman who seemed most in danger of *devaluing* or *foregoing* motherhood.”³ There was even a proposed amendment to the aforementioned Preservation of Racial Integrity Act that would have addressed white men’s roles in miscegenation, but it was never passed, again proving the misogynistic edge of the legal system.⁴ The so-called New Woman was inherently white, implying that only they were capable of challenging conventions and endangering the purity of the race by rejecting motherhood. With such a history of coercion into the domestic sphere and subsequent rebellion, white feminists still feel remnants of this oppression even today through their wariness of privileging motherhood over a career.

As white women fought the restrictive institutional practices of the 18th, 19th, and even 20th centuries, black women were fighting just to be seen. Doubly oppressed, black women faced sexism from their black male counterparts and indifference from white males who perceived black women as bodies that could only produce undesirable black children. While laws were almost obsessively focused on monitoring white female activity, “the legal system became less interested in black women or mulattas, since they could still transmit only black blood, as far as the law was concerned. White supremacists ignored black mothers because they figured very little in the calculus of white blood domination.”⁵ Of course, most white women were not too eager to offer support to black women, either. They were constantly grappling with their own reputations, and “perhaps it was the strain of that balancing act that kept so many white women from empathizing with their black sisters, who were effaced almost entirely by their underserved licentious reputation among whites and had no legal standing to make rape charges against the white men who had historically committed the most interracial rapes.”⁶ White men exerted control over both black and white women to affirm their own masculinity and racial status, since

dismissing women’s agency in their own sexual bodies helped to solidify white men’s power. White women’s obedience and fidelity bought them the protection they allegedly needed against black men. Black women had *no bargaining power* at all, since even their protests did little to contradict the widespread belief in their need and desire for white men’s sexual advances.⁷

White women were monitored closely by the patriarchy, but they at least had protection – black women were left voiceless and bereft of agency. Despite both being victims of patriarchal rule and manipulation, white and black women had very little solidarity. Such societal invisibility and lack of solidarity with their white counterparts was and still is a major historical barrier preventing black women from embracing their roles as mothers.

There is a fundamental difference, derived from class distinctions, between black and white motherhoods that originated during slavery and still persists today. Writing for *Clutch Magazine*, Tami Winfrey Harris cites author Deesha Philyaw, who “writes that historically, black women have rarely had the privilege to choose motherhood over career. Black women have always worked outside of the home—have almost always had to—even when society forbade ‘good’ white women from leaving their pedestals. We have ploughed the fields and raised other folks babies, as well as our own.”⁸ Harris, through Philyaw, argues that while white women were fighting for the right to pursue a career instead of motherhood, black women wanted the opposite. She illustrates the tension between Cottle’s white feminist standpoint that views motherhood as a remnant of patriarchal oppression and black feminism’s desire to claim motherhood in its purest sense. As Harris mentions, economic class plays a major role here. This economic barrier prevented black women from truly embracing their identities as mothers. Additionally, slave masters “figured that slave mothers were less likely to escape than slave men because of their attachment to their children...And they were mostly right. Few women escaped with their dependent children.”⁹ Black mothers were simply unable to relinquish their position for freedom due to their children, depriving them of their autonomy and establishing a nega-

tive precedent when it came to their experiences with motherhood. Most white women can afford to either just pursue a career or be a mother, but black women often had and still have to balance both.

The ironic objectification and sexualization of black women by the white patriarchy, in spite of their inferior status in society, further obstructed the path to black mother-

against white women, to describe Obama's role in the White House, declaring, "The 2012 election did not set her free. Even now, with her husband waddling toward lame duck territory, she is not going to let loose suddenly with some straight talk about abortion rights or Obamacare or the Common Core curriculum debate. Turns out, she was serious about that whole 'mom-in-chief' business."¹² Cottle's very word choice, insisting that the First Lady is still

“Obama actively subverts the historical traditions of black women having to compromise their motherhood due to white patriarchal supremacy and provides black women with a new model to follow.”

hood. White men focused heavily on maintaining the purity and chastity of white women, but they had few issues with perpetuating stereotypes of black female's hypersexuality and "exotic" bodies, even as they ignored their status as human beings. In fact, scientists were particularly fascinated with African bodies and the "protuberance of the buttocks...and the remarkable development of the labia minora, which were sufficiently well marked to distinguish these parts from those of any ordinary varieties of the human species. The racial difference of the African body...was located in its literal excess, a specifically sexual excess that placed her body outside the boundaries of the 'normal' female."¹⁰ Because of the emphasis placed on their genitals and excess, black women had to fend off rumors of licentiousness and sexual promiscuity, which conflicted directly with the virtue of motherhood. The very physicality of African women's bodies "became increasingly associated with sexual availability...those associations helped to establish a hierarchy between the races."¹¹ With a history of these stereotypes, black women struggled to enter the domestic sphere as simply mothers while fighting the promiscuous Jezebel label.

The historical context of the suppression of white women's agency in terms of their reproductive capabilities and confinement to the domestic sphere provides readers with a better understanding of Cottle's limited standpoint in her analysis of Michelle Obama's motherhood. To Cottle, Obama's celebration of motherhood comes off as resignation and compliance instead of as a move of activism. Cottle uses language of confinement, which was once used

confining and unable to let loose, emanates contempt for Obama's opting for motherhood. She even references how feminists hoped that the reelection would liberate her. As a white feminist, Cottle has an inculcated aversion to domesticity that she equates with patriarchal complacency, a remnant of the historical context of white male subjugation. Cottle even takes to objectifying and criticizing Obama for flourishing her body, as she states snidely, "FLOTUS has managed to remain above the fray—with her toned arms and her veggie garden and her radiant mom-in-chiefness."¹³ Another feminist cited in the article comments on Obama's arms, complaining, "I for one have seen enough of her upper appendages and her designer clothes."¹⁴ Maybe for Cottle, a "mom-in-chief" who displays her body is a feminist nightmare, but she lacks the historical authority to speak for the experience of Obama and black women as a whole. Applying her white history to Obama's black present, Cottle fails to notice the nuanced distinctions within her monolithic definition of motherhood.

Melissa Harris-Perry retorts derisively to the idea that Obama is playing it safe. In reality, Obama dismantles the historical obstacles (invisibility, economic dependence, and objectification) that have obstructed the path to black motherhood for years. Michelle Cottle insists that Obama sticks to mild and almost irrelevant tasks: she cites one feminist who asks coolly, "how can you hate a vegetable garden?"¹⁵ This construction of a demure and safe First Lady recalls black female voicelessness throughout history. Black women have a history of being ignored for their

deeds, and Cottle offers a similar argument surrounding Obama's ostensibly innocuous campaigns. Melissa Harris-Perry efficiently counters this argument by citing the impact of Obama's childhood obesity campaign, along with the controversy surrounding her desire to help lower income students attend college. Harris-Perry declares

the first lady is not playing it safe with this work. She has drawn plenty of right-wing criticism. No, Ms. Cottle, not everyone loves a vegetable garden... The president has been ridiculed as an elitist for suggesting that more people go to college. So if you think there's no political risk, maybe you haven't been paying attention. Also, you misunderstand the place Michelle Obama occupies as the first African-American first lady.¹⁶

Harris-Perry's most important argument comes from her assertion that Cottle merely fails to understand the place Obama occupies. Cottle, ignorant of the historical context of black women and their own version of motherhood, cannot speak accurately on that topic's behalf. As Harris-Perry illustrates, Obama actually dismantles historical bondage that once deprived black women of their voices and exerts her own agency to make her country finally listen to a powerful, black, and female voice.

After explaining how influential and controversial Obama's platforms are, Harris-Perry makes another major point — Obama's declaration of motherhood rejects the role of the Mammy. Despite what Cottle thinks, what makes Obama so revolutionary is that, "instead of agreeing that the public sphere is more important than Sasha and Malia, she buried Mammy and embraced being a mom on her own terms."¹⁷ Obama is able to do what black women have sought for centuries — just be a mom. A belittling title to white feminists, black motherhood carries connotations of autonomy and independence from white patriarchal stereotypes rather than the submission associated with white motherhood for some feminists. The Mammy stereotype implies economic dependence and inadequacy that force black mothers to work in order to support their children; but Obama, by placing her children first, reclaims wholly both that domestic space and economic agency. She, unlike many of the black slave mothers before her, leaves the plantation that is the modern day public arena for her children. Obama actively subverts the historical traditions of black women having to compromise their motherhood due to white patriarchal supremacy and provides black women with a new model to follow.

Obama even challenges the objectification of the black female body. Kat Stoeffel writes for *New York Magazine* about how

Harris-Perry saw Michelle as subverting expectations in more subtle ways. Take her anti-obesity and fitness campaigns. Where Cottle's feminists see a policy issue domestic enough for the "lady of the manor" to dip her "fashionably shod feet" into, the MSNBC host sees a defiant response to the media *that reduced her to a set of upper arms*. "For me, the immediate rational, reasonable response to that is to stop performing your body, to cover it up," Harris-Perry said. "Instead the First Lady did this extraordinary thing where she's like, *Oh you want to scrutinize? Here I am*. She went more sleeveless."¹⁸

Stoeffel brings up an interesting point about how Obama once again actually defies expectations rather than simply playing it safe as Cottle suggests. Instead of succumbing to the white male gaze, Obama finds empowerment through her body, and she does not care how tired white feminists are of seeing her arms. While this opinion of Harris-Perry comes from a source outside of her direct letter to Cottle, her point still stands. Of course, as a white feminist, Cottle's perspective of Obama is influenced by the experience of white females and patriarchal control of their sexuality, rather than a point of view supported by intersectionality and inclusion.

The lack of understanding on Cottle's part illustrates the history of tension between black and white women in their respective quests for equality; white women assumed that their struggle against forced domesticity was and is universal, despite black women hoping to just occupy that sphere. Black women have had to overcome certain economic and social barriers to enter the domestic sphere, while white women broke free from restrictions that confined them to such a sphere. Cottle's white, narrow-minded, and implied "universal" feminism is more damaging than Obama's proud allegiance to her daughters. Melissa Harris-Perry offers her more appropriate standpoint and perspective to analyze the situation and determines that, in fact, Michelle Obama's title of "mom-in-chief" redefines and reclaims black motherhood after a history of oppression. Feminism fails to be feminism when it discounts the histories and differences of all types of women — there is no set of feminist rules up to which Cottle can hold Obama, making her groundless hyperbole the real feminist nightmare.

ENDNOTES

1. Kitch 150.
2. Kitch 153.
3. Kitch 152, emphasis added.
4. Kitch 154.
5. Kitch 151.
6. Kitch 148.
7. Kitch 84, emphasis added.
8. Harris.
9. Kitch 150.
10. Somerville 26.
11. Kitch 74.
12. Cottle.
13. *Ibid.*, emphasis added.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*
16. Harris-Perry.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Stoeffel, emphasis added.

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