At Last . . . ?: Michelle Obama, Beyoncé, Race & History

Farah Jasmine Griffin

Late in the evening on January 20, 2009, newly sworn-in President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama made an appearance at The Neighborhood Ball. One of ten balls they would attend that night, The Neighborhood Ball was the first of its kind. Conceived as a "people's ball," a celebration for ordinary citizens and the residents of Washington, D.C., it launched the administration's efforts to establish a relationship with the city and to make the White House itself more accessible to the broader public. The ball featured such popular music entertainers as Shakira, Alicia Keyes, will.i.am, Mary J. Blige, and Stevie Wonder.

In the most memorable part of the evening, superstar Beyoncé Knowles serenaded the first couple during the ceremonial "first" dance. Because the event was televised live on ABC, the staging was dramatic. The first lady and president stood alone on a circular stage. Cued by the lush instrumental introduction to the R&B classic "At Last," the couple began to dance atop the presidential seal that had been painted on the stage floor. Across from them, on a stage in the middle of the audience, the elegantly clad Beyoncé began to sing Etta James's timeless song. Smiling sweetly at the couple like Lena Horne's gorgeous Good Witch Glenda in *The Wiz*, Beyoncé began her performance in a stately manner. Mid-song, she reached into the guttural depths of her range to pull from the deep traditions of Black American music and, in doing so, expressed a range of emotions, from celebra-

FARAH JASMINE GRIFFIN is the William B. Ransford Professor of English and Comparative Literature and African American Studies at Columbia University. Her books include *"Who Set You Flowin'?": The African-American Migration Narrative* (1995), *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday* (2001), and *Clawing at the Limits of Cool: Miles Davis, John Coltrane, and the Greatest Jazz Collaboration Ever* (with Salim Washington, 2008).

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tion to defiance. By the song's end, she was lyrically soaring. The Obamas applauded her; she bowed to them, overcome with emotion, before leaving the stage.

The moment was memorable for a number of reasons. The romance of the president and first lady, which had captivated many during the campaign, was now on full display. Mrs. Obama, dressed in a floating, feminine white gown that offset her brown complexion, was dancing to the same song the president had selected for the first dance at their wedding. Here, they seemed to re-create that moment, as if renewing their vows before a nation of witnesses. But even more significant, because this was the inauguration of America's first black president, because "At Last" is an R&B song, and because Beyoncé sang it in a style most often associated with soul and gospel, the song signified the triumphant culmination of what had long been a rather one-sided romance between black Americans and their nation. The fulfillment of our democratic principles? The achievement of a color-blind, post-racial America?

The performance of both the dance and the song struck a chord across race and generation. For the enthusiastic young people in the audience that night, it represented the promise of youth, of their own experience of race as something significant – important, even – though not limiting or constrictive. This was the hiphop generation, after all. For old-timers, particularly black old-timers, the performance may have represented a bittersweet sense of victory. As witnesses of the painful struggles that produced this moment, they watched it in memory of the many thousands gone – and with some continued trepidation and fear. They wondered, "Have we come this far? Really?" For my generation of middle-aged black professionals, educated at elite institutions during the Reagan 1980s, we saw ourselves: our generation's response to the difficult struggle that had made our ascension possible. We saw ourselves and thought: "At last."

All these perspectives represent a tension that has and will characterize the Obama years. Conflicting viewpoints are not evenly divided between generations. Instead, each generation has its share of those, on the one hand, who are eager to get over "race" – to put it behind us, to regard it as a relic of a past for which we have little use. On the other side are those who are often cast as so pessimistic about our nation they believe it incapable of change; they are considered too invested, either in their identities or their livelihoods – in their "narratives of victimization" – to accept the reality of our post-racial present. Somewhere in between are the pragmatists, who believe, "We've come a long way, baby, but we still got a long way to go."

We do not live in a post-racial time. In fact, to use that term is lazy. We *do* occupy a historical moment in which race and racism operate differently than they have in the past. Our society has removed all race-based legal barriers to equality. To claim things have not changed is wrongheaded; to claim that struggles for racial equality are behind us, or that they can be taken care of solely by attention to class, is equally so. We *are* witnessing the death of an epoch of white supremacy. All around us we experience its dying gasp – a desperate, dangerous gasp. But white supremacy is an old man who will not go gently into that good night. He will continue to find breath in elements of the Far Right, in the thinking of many mainstream white Americans, in other racial and ethnic groups, and, unfortunately, in far too many black people around the world. Nor are we at the

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"end of the African American narrative"; there has never been just one such narrative anyway. And, as with all narratives, those that deal with the black experience in the United States have always been constructed to meet the contemporary needs, desires, and aspirations of black people in a constantly shifting racial terrain.

A nation without racism is not an impossible achievement. Also, there are other forms of oppression and exploitation that act powerfully in the lives of black people. However, it is indeed premature to claim that we need no longer be aware of the existence of white supremacy and racism. The baleful racism that has been unleashed since the election of our first black president should be sufficient evidence of this reality. That large numbers of white Americans voted for a qualified, intelligent black candidate certainly is evidence of progress. It is proof that large portions of white America are becoming less racist. But "less racist" does not mean "post-racial." (Civil rights activist and scholar Cornel West, among others, has also made this distinction.) Too often in public discourse the phrase "post-racial" is used to suggest that black people and their allies should cease raising concerns about continued racial inequality.

Legal theorist Roy L. Brooks notes that "the problem of race in the Age of Obama is not racism but racial inequality." For Brooks, racial inequality can be found not only in differences in financial resources but also in "human (education and skills) and social (public respect, racial stigma, the ability to get things done in society)" resources as well.[1]

The major problem with the stance of post-raciality *and* with refusals to admit substantive change is that both are ahistorical and shortsighted. Let us return to The Neighborhood Ball and the women who shared the spotlight: First Lady Michelle Obama and the multitalented Beyoncé Knowles. What might we learn about the relationship between history and the ongoing significance of race by attending to their images and their cultural impact? Both Knowles and Obama occupy a space unimagined by earlier generations. A singing, dancing, acting black woman, who is also an entertainment mogul, and an Ivy League-educated, Harvard-trained lawyer-cum-first lady clearly herald something new (the latter even more so than the former). Yet these extraordinary women each represent something profoundly American, something deeply rooted in America's racial past, and something familiar but outwardly unrecognized by much of their public. Each has chosen to reveal and/or hide particular aspects of that history in order to move more easily into the American mainstream. By focusing on these women – their relationship to a particular aspect of America's racial history and how they mobilize it – we may reach a better understanding of the place of race in the contemporary historical moment.

> I am married to a black American who carries within her the blood of slaves and slave owners.
>
> –Barack Obama, Philadelphia, 2008

Our first glimpse of Michelle Obama was at the 2004 Democratic National Convention in Boston. Along with two small daughters, she joined her husband onstage following his triumphant and inspiring convention address, his historic introduction to the nation. Tall and trim, dressed elegantly in a white skirt suit with fashionable three-quarter-length sleeves, hair conservatively coiffed, she looked polished, poised,

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professional. She was very much like any number of black women in any major American city, but there was something striking and unexpected about seeing her on that stage. Black communities were abuzz. They not only wanted to know more about *him*, but just as often they asked, "Did you see his wife?" Observing her in the role of political spouse struck a chord. And, because people almost immediately began to talk about *him* as a future president, many black Americans began to imagine *her* as a first lady.

It was difficult to imagine any black woman in that role, but Mrs. Obama's unmistakable "blackness" made it an especially amusing possibility. Once Senator Obama announced his candidacy, Michelle Obama authenticated his blackness for many African Americans. He was not the descendant of enslaved ancestors; he had not grown up in a black community. But she was, and she had. The phrase, "He married her," was stated as proof that he made a conscious choice to identify with black people and to raise his children as African Americans. While she legitimated his racial authenticity for many African Americans, for some whites she became the lightning rod, the persistent reminder of his race. His opponents sought to paint her as the "angry," unpatriotic black woman. After all, she was the one who brought him into Pastor Jeremiah Wright's orbit. And then, in February 2008, she made the comment: "For the first time in my adult lifetime, I am really proud of my country." More precisely, she said:

> What we have learned over this year is that hope is making a comeback. It is making a comeback. And let me tell you something – for the first time in my adult lifetime, I am really proud of my country. And not just because Barack has done well, but because I think people are hungry for change. And I have been desperate to see our country moving in that direction and just not feeling so alone in my frustration and disappointment. I've seen people who are hungry to be unified around some basic common issues, and it's made me proud.

This was a simple statement of a feeling shared by many for whom the Obama campaign gave a sense of hope, a sense of national belonging, a sense of purpose. To be proud of one's country should be seen as something good. It is a step in a process. Mrs. Obama was suggesting that people like her gain a sense of pride through working to make their nation better. In the words of James Baldwin via Richard Rorty, this is the work of "achieving" our country. Rorty writes of a national pride that induces us to act on a vision of our country and the possibility that we may perfect it. This kind of pride encourages us to think of our citizenship "as an opportunity for action."[2] The vision Michelle Obama, the descendant of slaves, put forth is one in which Americans of every race and ethnicity can take part in making our country even better. In so doing, she seemed to build on the contention James Baldwin made at the end of *The Fire Next Time*:

> If we – and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others – do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare and achieve our country and change the world.[3]

Cindy McCain, wife of Barack Obama's opponent, said she was genuinely offended by Michelle Obama's remarks. She began to pepper her own campaign speeches

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with, "I have *always* been proud of my country." What she and the press failed to state is that the two women claimed significantly different historical relationships to their nation. Cindy McCain is a wealthy blonde heiress of a beer distributorship. Michelle Obama is the daughter of working-class African Americans and the descendant of slaves. Barack Obama's political opponents seized on Michelle Obama's statement as yet another example of her husband's lack of patriotism – an opportunity to question his relationship to America. Later, John McCain and Sarah Palin would pursue this path until it unleashed some of the most hateful and frightening instances of racism in recent memory. If Ivy League-educated, upper-middle-class professional Michelle Obama could ever have appeared militant or "threatening," then, indeed, we are far from a post-racial society.

It may not be surprising that many white people in the small towns and rural areas of so-called middle America had never encountered someone like Michelle Obama. What is stunning is how unfamiliar she appeared to mainstream media and to many of her peers. Michelle Obama and her white female counterparts had attended similar colleges, worked in similar environments, and shopped in the same stores. Perhaps this lack of familiarity is simply evidence of just how segregated our generation remains in spite of the proximity in which we live our lives. As was the case with Mrs. Obama, few of us continued to room with our freshman roommates after our first year of college. We chose instead to live with people of the same race. For the most part, we attended different parties and listened to different music. After graduation, we most likely attended different churches and continued to socialize in largely same-race groups.

Michelle Obama's story is more extreme than what most of us experienced. When Obama, then Michelle Robinson, arrived on Princeton's campus in Fall 1981, she met one of her freshman roommates, Catherine Donnelly, a native of New Orleans who was shocked to learn that her roommate was black. Donnelly's mother, Alice Brown, who had driven her daughter to campus, was "horrified." She went to the campus housing office and demanded that her daughter be moved to another room. "I told them we weren't used to living with black people," Brown recalled in 2008 to *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*.[4] There is no evidence that Obama was aware of Brown's reaction; nonetheless, her college thesis focused on racial issues at Princeton. The thesis itself would become the subject of controversy in campaign press coverage. In it, Obama had written, "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. . . . Regardless of the circumstances under which I interact with Whites at Princeton, it often seems as if, to them, I will always be Black first and a student second." Right-wing pundits used the thesis as fodder to accuse Obama of lacking gratitude and engaging in identity politics. They suggested she was ungrateful for the opportunities America had afforded her.

As the press pursued stories about Michelle Obama's days as a college student, the campaign commissioned genealogical research as well. With the assistance of the Obama campaign, *The Washington Post* reported Mrs. Obama's paternal family tree, while *The New York Times* covered the history on her mother's side. Obama's lineage demonstrated a trajec-

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tory familiar to the descendants of U.S.-born slaves: enslavement, Reconstruction, and the Great Migration. On both sides, researchers uncovered ancestors who had been enslaved as well as evidence of anonymous white ancestry. They found evidence of each generation's efforts to provide its children with education and opportunity. They found family members who escaped the strictures of the Jim Crow South by migrating to Chicago.

Two ancestors in particular stand out: the one-armed boy, Fraser Robinson, and the five-year-old slave girl Melvinia. Fraser Robinson, Michelle Obama's paternal great-grandfather, was born in 1884 to a former slave. When Fraser was ten years old his arm was amputated because it had been broken by a tree limb. Francis Nesmith, the white son of an overseer, became fond of the young boy and employed him as a live-in servant. The one-armed young man taught himself to read and write and became a shoemaker and a newspaper salesman. Less is known about Obama's maternal ancestor, Melvinia. She appears in the will of her master as a "6 year old Negro girl" who would be bequeathed to his daughter. By the time she turned fifteen she gave birth to a child, the son of an unknown white father. Melvinia and the anonymous white man are the maternal great-great-great grandparents of Michelle Obama.

From its construction to the servants who worked there, the history of the White House has always been intertwined with that of slavery. For the first time, a descendant of the enslaved lives there as first lady. Michelle Obama sought to present her family tree as evidence of a painful period of our nation's past, a history with which we should be familiar so that we can move beyond it. She told the *Post*:

> It's good to be a part of playing out history in this way. . . . It could be anybody. But it's us, it's our family, it's that story, that's going to play a part in telling a bigger story. . . . [It is a process of] uncovering the shame, digging out the pride that is part of that story – so that other folks feel comfortable about embracing the beauty and the tangled nature of the history of this country.[5]

Significantly, the *Post* reported that some of Obama's relatives were reluctant to talk too much about or "delve too deep" into the family's past for fear "of stoking racial tensions and damaging"[6] Barack Obama's chances of winning the election. Their fears were not unwarranted.

Michelle Obama's ancestry may have been a cause for an honest discussion about our nation's painful but inspiring history. Instead, for much of the campaign, she was consistently criticized from a number of quarters. She was too aggressive, too angry; she was not sufficiently demure and adoring. Throughout the campaign she was caricatured as a Sapphire-like loud-mouth matriarch. *The National Review* published a cover story calling her "Mrs. Grievance." The opposition website TheObamaFile.com seemed dedicated to portraying her as a gun-wielding black militant. It wasn't just right-wing bloggers who portrayed her this way. The liberal *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd launched a continuous diatribe against her that continues to the present. In fact, it was Dowd who unearthed the old problematic adjective *emasculating* in her description of Michelle Obama. Other outlets reported the existence of a mysterious recording of Obama using the epithet "whitey" in a talk she gave at Trinity United Church of Christ, in Chicago. When asked about these charges, she is reported to have denied ever using the phrase, remarking, "It's such a dated word. I'm much cooler than that."[7]

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When she and her husband celebrated a primary victory with a fist-bump, a Fox News anchor called the gesture "a terrorist fist jab."[8]

Focus groups run by the Obama campaign found that, among white Americans, Michelle Obama was perceived as "unpatriotic," "entitled," and "angry." In the weeks leading up to the 2008 Democratic National Convention in Denver, the campaign worked hard to transform her image. The culmination of these efforts was her speech before the convention on August 25, 2008. The speech was preceded by a video, *South Side Girl*, which documented her "American" story, followed by a loving introduction by her brother. During her speech, she was articulate and empathetic, patriotic and visionary. She stressed education without referring to her own elite educational pedigree. She acknowledged her debt to the civil rights and women's movements without lingering on these subjects for too long. She was neither threatening nor loud. She was soft and feminine. She said, "I love this country." By the end of her speech, when she was joined by her daughters, she had won over a large number of Americans. Her approval ratings soared.

As first lady she is the most popular member of the Obama administration. She is Mom-in-Chief, the fashion plate whose every sartorial choice is scrutinized, and she has chosen a meaningful and necessary cause: the fight against childhood obesity. The minute she steps out of this safe zone, however, charges of "entitlement" return. Thus, she suffers the fate of many of her forbearers, from Jacqueline Kennedy to Nancy Reagan. However unlike them, she has been very careful not to do anything that might portray her as the "black" first lady.

Beyoncé Giselle Knowles first emerged as the lead singer of the successful 1990s girl group Destiny's Child. From the beginning, it was evident that she had been groomed as the group's star and was poised to break out as a solo act. Her father, Matthew Knowles, was the group's manager; her mother, Tina Knowles, their designer and fashion and hair stylist. Beyoncé's first solo effort, *Dangerously In Love*, released in 2003, earned five Grammy Awards. Since Destiny's Child disbanded in 2005, Knowles has released two other solo albums, *B'day* in 2006 and *I Am . . . Sasha Fierce* in 2008. Each album has been a commercial and critical success. In addition, she has starred in a number of films, most notably *Dream Girls*, in which she played Deena Jones, a character inspired by Diana Ross, and *Cadillac Records*, in which she played a young Etta James. Knowles has also launched her own clothing line, House of Déreon, as well as a fragrance line. She has endorsement deals with L'Oréal, Tommy Hilfiger, Pepsi, and Emporio Armani. In 2008, she earned more than $87 million. In the course of her career, she has sold more than 400 million records.

Knowles's father is African American; her mother is black Creole. Tina Knowles was born in Galveston, Texas, to Agnes DeRouen, originally of Delcambre, Louisiana, and Lumis Albert Beyince of Abbeville, Louisiana. After marrying, the couple moved to Galveston. Both were mixed race French-speaking Creoles claiming African, French, and Native American heritage. While Beyoncé identifies as African American, she has always claimed her Creole heritage, which has been central to how she markets herself and her music.

Beyoncé follows in a long line of talented and beautiful black women enter-

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tainers such as Josephine Baker, Lena Horne, and Dorothy Dandridge. Diana Ross and Tina Turner have also been inspirations. A powerful singer and equally dynamic dancer, Beyoncé has cultivated an image that alternates between the good Southern girl; the couture glamour of Baker, Horne, and Ross; and the highly sexualized, near-athletic dancing ability of Turner and, to a lesser degree, the young Josephine Baker. Though she played Etta James, she shares little with the more "tragic" heroines of the tradition: James or James's idol, Billie Holiday. Nor does she share their artistry.

Beyoncé occupies the status she does because these pioneers carved a place for her in American popular culture. Like them, she can sing, dance, and act, but she is also able to reap the full rewards of her labor and to control fully the direction of her career. She writes most of her own songs and has served as executive producer or co-producer for a number of her films. Unlike her predecessors, she has not been forced to choose between "respectable lady" and "bombshell." She comfortably occupies both spaces, having selected the alter ego Sasha Fierce to express the latter. However, that she has chosen two public personas to separately convey her respectable and sexual selves suggests that black women have yet to be granted the full privilege of expressing their sexual agency without paying a price. On the other hand, Beyoncé's two personas signify an intelligent career choice; she may be able to age gracefully into the more elegant persona. The men behind Knowles – her father Matthew Knowles and her husband Jay-Z – are powerful, successful black men, but the degree to which they manage her career is minimal; and she appears to have escaped the need for white-male sponsorship. Billie Holiday and Sarah Vaughan were both managed by black husbands; Diana Ross is perhaps one of the first black women whose involvement with a black male entrepreneur, Berry Gordy, resulted in full-scale superstardom. Furthermore, Beyoncé's music is not relegated to urban radio. She can pack stadiums. She brings different kinds of audiences to the movie theaters. She is beloved, and imitated, across race, class, sexuality, generation, and national borders.

Beyoncé fits within the niche of the fair-skinned, possibly mixed race, sexual beauty: a category that was born in the New World centuries ago. That she seems neither angry nor tragic, that she did not rise from material poverty, that she is never heard lamenting the lack of options available to her because of her race: all make her a pop diva of and for our times. She represents a new America. She is not of the Obama era; she helped usher it in.

And yet Beyoncé is also deeply rooted in aspects of American history. She calls on and mobilizes both a personal and collective racial past to market herself to contemporary audiences worldwide. Beyoncé's very specific mixed race identity is entangled within the histories of New World racial slavery and the racial hierarchies that the institution bore. In short, Beyoncé builds on the fantasy of the mulatta temptress, which has origins in New World cultures from Brazil to Cuba to the American South, especially New Orleans. By highlighting her Louisiana Creole ancestry, her fair skin, blond weave, and hyper-sexualized performance style, she has parlayed a centuries-old stereotype into a lucrative and dynamic career. (She has done so without the highly public meltdowns of stars such as Whitney Houston and Britney Spears.) Thus, she has opened doors for other artists while reinforcing certain notions – sometimes destructive – of what is desirable and beautiful.

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The mixed race or ethnically ambiguous woman is considered at once beautiful because of her proximity to whiteness and sexual because of her black "blood." Historically, she was portrayed as a temptress or a seductress in order to justify her sexual exploitation. Over time she has been the object of fantasy for both black and white men, from the slave South to contemporary Brazil. She has even found her way into the pantheon of new world deities in the forms of Erzulie in Haiti and New Orleans, Oshun in Cuba, and Oxun in Brazil, all of whom manifest as La Mulatta, a deity of beauty, creativity, and all things sensual.

Either Beyoncé herself or those who have styled her visual image are fully aware of this legacy. In early campaigns for her clothing line, in photographs that accompany *B'day*, and in the video for "Déjà Vu," the first single released from that album, Beyoncé is portrayed as a figure in two separate but related narratives that derive from specific aspects of the histories cited above: the "fancy girl" trade of antebellum New Orleans, which morphed into the Storyville Brothels featuring "quadroon" and "octoroon" women in the late nineteenth century; and free women of color in Louisiana involved with the institution of plaçage, a form of concubinage. New Orleans has long been known for its permissive interracial sexual culture. The city's slave market was among the nation's largest and was characterized by its fancy girl trade, which sold mixed race women into various forms of sex slavery. Historian Alecia P. Long notes that following the Civil War, "[t]he city ceased to be the nation's largest slave market and most permissive port. Instead, it became a tourist destination that encouraged and facilitated indulgence, especially in prostitution and sex across the color line."[9]

By 1897, the city had established two vice districts, the most famous of which was Storyville. The fancy girl slave trade and the brothels were only two aspects of what Long refers to as "the commercial sexual culture of New Orleans." The institution of plaçage was not a form of prostitution but represented "the formal and sometimes even contractual arrangements between white men and women of color . . . which spelled out the financial terms of the relationships." These relationships and the terms by which they were governed were often negotiated by the young women's mothers, who presented their daughters at the famous octoroon or quadroon balls.

Beyoncé has presented an image that signifies both the brothel and plaçage traditions. In 2005, she and her mother launched their clothing line, House of Déreon, inspired by her seamstress grandmother, Agnes DeRouen. In the advertising campaign, Beyoncé was featured, with her mother in a supporting role as either a seamstress providing alterations or a beloved mother who offers an admiring glance or affectionate touch. In a few ads, Tina Knowles appears literally to present her daughter for the viewer's admiration and consumption. In one, both women wear evening gowns. In another, Beyoncé stands in front of a full length mirror in satin and lace lingerie, or in a slip or slip-dress, while her mother can be seen in the mirror's reflection. All photographs are set in a boudoir or a lushly designed seamstress studio, and each has a photograph of the Creole matriarch in gilded frame. The ad campaign for Spring 2010 featured a portrait of Beyoncé, bare shouldered and with her head wrapped elaborately in blue and green silk. The head wrap was adorned with a huge broach made of green stones, an image that recalled the tignons worn

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by Creoles of color in New Orleans. The head wrap, which resembles a West African gele, was worn by free women of color in New Orleans during the Spanish colonial period and later. In 1785, tignon laws were passed to enforce a dress code for *gens de couleur*, especially women, as a means of distinguishing them from white women. The women of color rivaled white women in fashion, style, and beauty. Once the laws forced women of color and black women to cover their heads, the Creoles created highly stylized head wraps, decorating their tignons with jewels, feathers, ribbons, and other embellishments in order to distinguish their class standing.

If the ads for House of Déreon suggest plaçage, then the photos that accompany *B'day* and the video for "Déjà Vu" are more explicit in their association. In them Beyoncé wears a series of costumes, almost all of which resemble sexual costumes – from dominatrix to French maid. The most obvious finds her walking down a railroad track clad in a ruffled white cotton romper: a combination of blues singer Robert Johnson at the crossroad and photographer E. J. Bellocq's Storyville whores. Bellocq was best known for his images of Storyville's octoroon prostitutes. His photos inspired the 1978 film about child prostitution in New Orleans, *Pretty Baby*, starring Brooke Shields, as well as Michael Ondaatje's 1976 novel about mythical New Orleans trumpeter Buddy Bolden, *Coming through Slaughter*. The "Déjà Vu" video features Beyoncé as a sex-crazed woman, dancing in the wilderness or alternately lying seductively across velvet couches. At one point she appears poised to perform fellatio on her partner, Jay-Z.

What is important here is the way that Beyoncé's image is grounded at the nexus of race, sex, and commerce. Significantly, New Orleans history boasts a number of mixed race women who parlayed both concubinage and prostitution into economic independence, property ownership, and entrepreneurship. A select few became highly successful madams, and an even greater number were successful seamstresses and hairdressers. The high degree of black property ownership in New Orleans has been attributed to the estates left by mixed race foremothers. Certainly, Beyoncé earned her wealth with hard work and virtuosic talent. Nonetheless, the marketing of that talent via a visual vocabulary that references commercial sexual culture has helped ensure her success. Most of Beyoncé's audience, consumers of her clothing and music, are unaware of the history behind the images. For her stylists, that particular history may be part of an endless source of cultural references that they can refer to for inspiration. What is significant is the way that this particular set of images resonates with an important part of our nation's past. While any number of young women performers may choose to market themselves in similarly sexualized roles, Beyoncé's lineage signifies a particular kind of relationship to the images of herself that she projects.

Beyoncé's enormous success heralds an America where race no longer necessarily bars achievement but where old mythologies continue to resonate and sell. Furthermore, if she signals the dawn of a new day in which mixed race heritage is valorized, a notion of a post-racial culture does not necessarily follow. The veneration of mixed race identity may challenge white supremacist hierarchies, but it can also accommodate a continued degradation of blackness. One need only study the history of mixed race societies such as Brazil and the Dominican Republic, where black people still sit at the bottom of the racial hierar-

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chy. Within the boundaries of the United States, we continue to live in a culture that devalues blackness, as is evident in a variety of contexts, from children's preference for white dolls, to the value placed on white and mixed race adoptees versus that placed on black children, to the profound racial disparities that continue to plague black communities nationwide.

The emergence and acceptance of Michelle Obama and Beyoncé as embodiments of American womanhood indeed signal a new racial era for our nation. Beyoncé has been easier for the public to accept because she is an entertainer, a long-accepted role for black women. As a sex symbol, moreover, she does not present a threat to established categories. However, Obama's acceptance is more tenuous. She occupies a thoroughly new role for black women and thus walks a very fine line; she must exercise discretion lest she express too firm an opinion or appear too confident. The mainstream acceptance of talented black individuals is not without significance. That blackness is relegated to the superficial or the sexual suggests a continued devaluation of black people, their history, and their experiences. Nevertheless, images of Michelle Obama and Beyoncé are available to all our nation's girls; that they may now aspire to the previously unimagined heights occupied by their idols is perhaps the greatest indication of our nation's progress. Unfettered access to these heights will be the true test of our post-racial future.

ENDNOTES

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2 Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth Century America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 11.

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