



**MICHELLE OBAMA:
FIGHTING FOR THE WORLD AS IT SHOULD BE**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

Only a hater, moon-howler or holdout from another time, could honestly deny the awesome beauty and meaning of Michelle Obama's Democratic Convention speech with her consummate self-presentation, her firm focus on family, her insistent advocacy for her husband and her common-ground affirmation of our "obligation to fight for the world as it should be". Even before she walks out, but certainly after, there is a thick sense of a reversal of order, or at least a serious change worthy of note and announcement. Blacks are not in the back searching for closer seats, but are already in front. Women are not just watchers, sign-wavers or showcase wives, and there is a woman who is at the center of every serious subject and the framer of the most important discourse and discussion of the evening. And even in the midst of post-Black proposals and illusions, she is unmistakably Black, conscious, capable and committed, as we said in the Sixties.

Also, there is a heightened sense that the face of the president and first lady no longer has to be White, that as Michelle Obama said, thru "a blessing hard won by those who came before . . .," she and Barack Obama stand "where the current of history meets this new tide of hope". Michelle Obama's meaning and message revolves around her being an African or Black, a woman and an American, and how she always defines and conducts herself.

The essential value and meaning of her message for Black people is her presentation of a family portrait of love, loyalty, striving, sacrifice, moral grounding and commitment to community service. It is, indeed, a welcome counter to the standard and stereotypical presentation of pathology so often peddled as proof positive of a defective and self-destructive people. She

defines her brother as a blessing, her husband as extraordinary; her children as "the heart of (her) heart", her father as a "rock, provider, champion and hero", and her mother as "a sustaining force, a woman whose integrity, compassion and intelligence (are) reflected in (her) own daughters".

She talks of the nurturing, sustaining and value instruction of her parents, Mr. Frasier and Mrs. Marian Robinson. She tells us "It was the greatest gift a child can receive, never doubting for a single minute you are loved, cherished and have a place in this world". And she and Barack are determined to always provide this for their children, Malia and Sasha. Then she says, "thanks to their faith and hard work we were able to go on to college". Her story is a source of pride and a lesson for us as a people and for this country. It reminds those who do likewise to continue and dare even more, and those who don't, to dare to do it also.

As a woman, Michelle Obama is a powerful and appealing presence, possessing a femininity unmistakably Black in form and feeling and in her critical and cultural understanding of the world. It is in the graceful way she walks, the way she stands, talks and turns, the way she smiles, gestures and says "you see" to make a point, a kind of cultural conversational seasoning like "see what 'um saying" when you want somebody not simply to hear you but also to feel you. There is no artificiality about her speech or the special way she relates to her man or speaks her mind on matters of life, love and struggle. She offers another paradigm of beauty in the midst of the media models of anorexic aspirations and Botox bad faith. It is a wholeness of person and presence, a concept captured in the ancient

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Egyptian word *neferu*—which means beauty, goodness and excellence all at once and in any way you want it.

And finally, she is a multidimensional woman with numerous simultaneous roles and responsibilities. She tells us she is a blessed sister, a loving wife, a children-centered and committed mom, a beloved and devoted daughter, and a co-worker with her husband in the awesome task of turning “this new tide of hope” into a new life and leadership for this country worthy of humanity’s highest ideals.

And that brings us to the problematic and promise of America. Michelle duly and diplomatically spent time declaring her love for the country, her belief in its promise and our capacity to come together to be a new, just and good society. She and Barack intend to continue to open up and occupy critical space in this country, not just to be where Whites are, but rather, as she said, to honor a legacy, finish a historic work and pull the country together to carry out our obligation to struggle to remake the world as it should be and can become.

To accomplish this, we all understand how important it is for White folks not to be too threatened by our move forward and out of the shadow of their paternalism, patronage and persistent need to have us declare our unconditional and uncritical love and loyalty to this country. Malcolm would say it is an indirect way of seeking approval by its rulers who have so defined the country

that they have equated it with themselves. They cannot tolerate being taken to task by an ancient or modern prophet or preacher, Jeremiah, or moral teacher of ancient Egypt, Khunanpu, who criticized the rulers and people for their corrupt and unrighteous ways, condemned without compromise injustice and oppression, and lifted up their voices for the vulnerable, the needy and the have-nots.

So when Michelle and Barack talk about struggling to make the world as it should be, we must remember to start with America itself. This means putting aside illusions about a perfect union, stop pretensions of solving race, class and gender problems simply by the magic of declaration and desire and get busy in our efforts to end them. We can win elections by praising the country regardless of its actions at home and abroad, but to end oppression and achieve justice, provide housing and health care, create an economy beneficial for everyday people, and end the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the occupation of Haiti and Palestine and the savaging of Darfur, we need to imagine another way and work and struggle to bring it into being. And it, of necessity, will mean recognition and respect for each people and person and the worthiness and indispensability of each group’s views and values on how to reconceive and reconstruct this ongoing, unfinished project we call multicultural America.

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