

Michelle Hits Her Stride: The First Lady's Diverse Approach to Diversity

Source: Allison Samuels / *Newsweek*

There have been plenty of un-veiling ceremonies for new statues at the U.S. Capitol. But when Michelle Obama peeled the cover off the bronze bust of abolitionist Sojourner Truth last week, the moment was heavy with symbolism. Truth is the first African-American woman to be honored with a statue in the Capitol. In a way no first lady before her ever could have done, Obama connected the dots between herself and the black feminist pioneer. "Now many young boys and girls like my own daughters will come to Emancipation Hall and see the face of a woman who looks like them," she told the gathering. "I hope that Sojourner Truth would be proud to see me, a descendant of slaves, serving as the first lady of the United States of America."

It was just the kind of scene I'd been hoping for when Barack Obama won the presidency last fall. I knew that Michelle Obama was already changing the way we see ourselves as African-American women. But I also hoped she would begin to knock down ugly stereotypes and educate people about American black culture. What's remarkable now—just over that much-hyped 100-day mark—is how quickly and decisively Michelle has taken on the issues that matter most to us.

From the start, Michelle never shied away from being an African-American role model. "I think it's clear that Michelle Obama is very comfortable in her own skin," says Debbie Walsh, director of the Center of American Women in Politics at Rutgers University. "She's not sending a message that I'm the first lady who just happens to be African-American. She's saying I'm an African-American first lady. There is a difference, and she's not afraid to show that."

One place that difference is already showing up: the White House guest list. When Michelle held a daylong program for Women's History Month in March, white celebs Sheryl Crow and Fran Drescher were among the invited "role models." But "I would say that 80 percent of the women role models were African-American," says Debra Lee, chairman and CEO of BET Holdings, who was asked to speak. "And that was just amazing to be a part of because these women are just not given that type of recognition enough."

While black stars like WNBA champ Lisa Leslie and singer Alicia Keys fanned out to talk to students at D.C. schools, Michelle herself headed to Anacostia High School, one of the city's most troubled. Michelle shared her own modest background and described the ridicule she faced from neighborhood kids for "acting white" when she got good grades. "To have her sit right before us like that and seem so real and sincere was like a movie or something," says La Tisha Butler, 17. "We were all tripping because she said getting good grades wasn't acting white ... I could tell she really cared about us. It wasn't just some speech."

Later that night, more than 150 girls—also mostly minorities—were invited back to dinner at the White House, where they were paired up with women like actress Debbie Allen, black female astronaut Mae Jemison and Rutgers University basketball coach Vivian Stringer. "I can only imagine as a young black girl what that would have meant to me to see and hear all those women tell me I could be what I wanted," says Stringer, who juggled coaching games in the NCAA playoffs to attend.

There are few photo-ops that show the first lady with anything but a diverse group. "Mrs. Obama's agenda has always been to include everyone and make sure the White House is open to all people," says Katie McCormick Lelyveld, Michelle's press secretary. "We make a point at each event to make sure you see all types of faces of people with different types of stories. It's exactly the same thing she did on the campaign trail."

Friends say that Michelle's own self-confidence and comfort in navigating between different cultures has made it easy for her to implement her own agenda now. "She's her own woman with her own ideas, and that wasn't going to change just because she got into the White

House," said one friend who asked not to be identified discussing private details about the Obamas. "She knows she's the first role model black women have seen at this level and she knows the incredible opportunity she has to uplift them."

Obama's outreach to her own community has also meant granting interviews to publications that don't normally rate a seat in the White House briefing room. In her cover story with *Black Hair*, Michelle described her morning routine of getting the girls ready for school. (The magazine also featured styling tips from Michelle's hairdresser.) This month, Michelle and her mother, Marian Robinson, are on the cover of *Essence*; inside, they speak about raising confident and successful children in the black community. And this is her second *Essence* cover since January. "Our audience is fascinated by this woman and her family," said Angela Burt-Murray, editor of *Essence*. And she is gracious enough to share that with us. She knows what she means to our community."

You might think all this focus on African-Americans might be a turnoff to the nonblack part of the nation. But so far Michelle's approval ratings match or even surpass her husband's. Last month, she hit 72 percent in a Gallup poll. "Who could have seen this coming after the *New Yorker* cover and all the other negative press she received last year," says Walsh.

Part of Michelle's appeal may stem from her diverse approach to diversity. She turned the White House fountains green for St. Patrick's Day and, along with the president, hosted the White House's first-ever Passover seder. "She did exactly the same thing when she was an executive in Chicago—put a group of different people together and allowed voices to be heard that hadn't been before," said Mellody Hobson, president of Ariel Capital and who has known the Obamas for more than 10 years. "That's who she is—it's a natural thing for her to do."

Michelle's agenda is playing out in subtler ways, too. The first lady has made a point of wearing a variety of lesser-known, minority designers—a habit that has infuriated some established designers. But model Naomi Campbell thinks the first lady's clothes are meant to send a distinct message to designers who rarely hire black models. "Why would she concern herself with mainstream designers who don't even put their clothes on women who look like her in ads or fashion shows?" Campbell asks.

There will continue to be endless opportunities for Mrs. Obama to make a difference in the African-American community over the next four years. And endless opportunities for critics to assess her impact. But for many African-American women like me—who still stop in awe when we see her face on magazine covers—just knowing Michelle Obama is comfortable in her own skin is a pretty good start.

Write a thesis statement for this article:

Who is the intended audience?

What is the author's purpose?

Directions:

1. **Show evidence of a close reading: highlight areas of confusion, write comments/thoughts in the margin, define vocabulary, etc.**
2. **Write a one-page reflection in your Writer's Notebook using the following topics:**
 - a. **Do you feel Michelle Obama is including all races in her practice of inclusiveness? Why or why not?**
 - b. **Some may argue that all this focus on African-Americans continues to segregate them rather than looking at all of us as "Americans". Do you agree with this? Why or why not?**
 - c. **What can the first lady do to improve her diverse approach to diversity?**