

How Michelle Obama subverted respectability politics with a ponytail

If you weren't looking for it, you might have missed her act of resistance at Trump's inauguration.

by [Brittney Cooper](#) in the [February 28, 2018](#) issue



Donald Trump, Barack Obama, and Michelle Obama at Trump's inauguration January 20, 2017. Photo © REX/Shutterstock (via AP images)

Respectability politics died the day Michelle Obama showed up at her last official engagement as First Lady with a thrown-together ponytail-bun combination and a facial expression fit for a funeral. She looked flawless as always. She also looked fed up and ready to go. Respectability politics—the belief that black people can overcome many of the everyday, acute impacts of racism by dressing properly and having education and social comportment—is, first and foremost, performed as a kind of sartorial prerogative. What I mean is that your fashion choices are subject to great scrutiny. Black people are taught to care about how they look and how their children look. If you see a little black girl out in public with her hair unkempt—her parts unintentionally jagged, her edges unsmoothed, her ponytails askew, or her hair ornaments not in their proper place—you can be assured that there is some black woman somewhere asking, “Who does that baby belong to?”

Black women’s hairstyles are their own cultural vocabulary, which changes depending on mood, life circumstance, and who exactly will be seeing us on any given day. Mrs. Obama’s hairstyle was the kind you put together after you’d been up all night packing and it’s time to get your shit, leave the keys on the counter, and go. It’s not public hair. It is not hair given to inaugural pomp and circumstance. It is everyday black-girl hair. We learn this complex hair vocabulary as we sit perched, often for hours, between the knees of mothers, aunties, and hairstylists, trained and untrained, from babyhood forward.

Every night, my mother painstakingly parted and greased my scalp and then plaited or rolled my hair, for ease of styling in the morning. A few hours later, I would sit between her legs while she parted my hair into three or four neat sections, affixed rubber bands to the tops of each section, and then twisted my ponytails. She finished by tying ribbons at the tops and snapping barrettes on the ends. At the end of each day, she would fuss and scold when I came home with those same barrettes missing and ponytails askew and unraveled, after “ripping and running and not being careful” at recess. At age 12, when my mother finally decided it was time for me to get a perm, my hairdresser, Mrs. Earline, asked my mother, “Are you sure?” And later, when Mom came to pick me up with my newly permed, silky tresses, Mrs. Earline said, “I prayed over this baby’s head. And when I didn’t see any hair on the comb as I worked it through, I knew the Lord was saying it was going to be alright.” Maintaining my head of long, thick hair was a community project.

At age 15, when I accompanied my mother and her three sisters to see the movie premiere of *Waiting to Exhale*, I knew what it meant, then, when Bernadine, newly separated from her cheating husband, went to the hairdresser and asked her stylist to chop off nearly every inch of her beautiful luxurious mane. Even though I didn't have the emotional maturity to understand the devastation of losing a marriage, I knew how much effort it took to grow that length and thickness of hair and keep it beautiful. I knew how much black women and girls envied having long, thick hair in a world where white women's ability to grow and regrow hair like weeds was the standard of beauty. Chopping it all off meant she was going through something exceedingly terrible.

My social media and text feeds lit up the moment we got a good look at Mrs. Obama's last inauguration hairdo. Throughout her two terms as First Lady, and particularly in the second term, Mrs. Obama's public hair was always long and flowing, with unique kinds of cuts and styles. Black women were culturally obsessed with both her fashion choices and her hair. Was it permed or was it natural? Was she rocking bangs? Who was her stylist and what were they doing to give her hair all that bounce and body? How were Malia and Sasha wearing their hair? These questions are all forms of cultural assessment that black women and girls do with other black women and girls. Though sometimes it can morph into meangirlness, in Mrs. Obama's case, our running cultural commentary about her hair was one of seeing her and feeling seen. It meant that there were black girls in the White House with hair—challenges, and woes, and triumphs—just like us.

So when I saw her hair on her last day, it was clear that she had not spent hours in a stylist's chair getting her 'do done just right. Presumably, she would have wanted to be a fashion stunner for her final formal public appearance. Instead, this bona fide fashion icon showed up to the inauguration of Donald Trump with a quick and convenient, on-the-go 'do, and what looked like a good church dress she had pulled from the closet. Certainly, she may simply have been gracious in letting Melania have her moment. But there was also something about the refusal to perform the public standard—a standard that Mrs. Obama had herself set—that marked an unceremonious ending.

Her hair was a signal to the world that what we were about to witness was some bullshit. She knew it. We knew it. "Do y'all see this shit?" that hair asked of all of us who were watching or deliberately not watching our complicated American homeland being placed in the hands of a mentally unwell fascist. Like the rest of us,

she might have to accept it, but she didn't have to like it. The "I refuse to be botheredness" of that ponytail evinced rage of both the eloquent and the elegant varieties. It wasn't so much about the actual hairstyle. A bun or ponytail can be elegant and appropriate. It was the combination of this kind of informal updo with a dress that was pretty, but also unremarkable, that signaled a kind of pulling back, a disengagement, with the American public. Mrs. Obama didn't throw her middle fingers up at the system that had just elected Donald Trump. However, the subtlety in her refusal of pomp and circumstance belied a deep disdain for the way in which the American people had rejected the work of her and President Obama, by installing his nemesis—a man who had started a whole movement questioning his citizenship—in the White House.

Respectability politics are at their core a rage-management project. Learning to manage one's rage by daily tamping down that rage is a response to routine assaults on one's dignity in a world where rage might get you killed or cause you to lose your job. Mrs. Obama had to learn this lesson quickly, and on the national stage, after being accused and publicly caricatured as an Angry Black Woman when Mr. Obama ran for his first term. She chose to channel her energy into slaying the American public in another way, by offering an impeccable standard of fashion to a watching world. Sometimes that is what black women do when we can't give in to the murderous levels of rage we feel at the indignities we experience. We can't kill. But we can *slay*.

Rage is a fundamentally more reasonable response to America's cultural investment in the disrespect of black women than being respectable. That's why it's damn near impossible for rage and respectability to reside in the same place. On her last day, Mrs. Obama didn't sublimate the rage over Trump and his wife to the province of *the slay*. She simply refused. Rage is a kind of refusal. To be made a fool of, to be silenced, to be shamed, or to stand for anybody's bullshit. It is a refusal of the lie that black women's anger in the face of routine, everyday injustice is not legitimate. Black women's rage is a way of looking these mischaracterizations in the face and responding: "You got me *alltheway* fucked up." This is what I heard—what I *felt*—when I saw Mrs. Obama's ponytail.

Audre Lorde, the first writer to offer a black feminist theory of anger, famously argued in "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism," an essay that I always keep close at hand:

Women of Color in America have grown up within a symphony of anger at being silenced at being unchosen, at knowing that when we survive, it is in spite of a world that takes for granted our lack of humanness, and which hates our very existence outside of its service. And I say *symphony* rather than *cacophony* because we have had to learn to orchestrate those furies so that they do not tear us apart.

Black women's rage is a kind of orchestrated fury. Lorde went on to say, "We have had to learn to move through them and use them for strength and force and insight within our daily lives. Those of us who did not learn this difficult lesson did not survive. And part of my anger is always libation for my fallen sisters." Michelle Obama's negotiation of Trump's inauguration, the manner in which she both expressed her disdain but kept it respectful at the same time, was nothing short of symphonic.

Black folks codified the ideology of respectability in the decades after Reconstruction after the federal government, helped along by indifferent white northerners, left newly freed black folks in the South to fend for themselves against the terroristic whims and fancies of angry white southerners, who were still licking their wounds over their Civil War loss. Women and men like Anna Julia Cooper, Mary Church Terrell, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Booker T. Washington reasoned that if black folks learned to work hard, educate themselves, and stay out of trouble, white people would see that we were good, respectable people, *human beings*, worthy of both citizenship and protection. Initially, respectability politics was a survival strategy in the face of the massive potential for violence. It was a conservative strategy but an imminently reasonable one for 19th- and early 20th-century blacks faced with high rates of illiteracy, housing and job insecurity, and cyclical influxes to the North of black folks looking to make a better life. Showing these black people how to present a respectable image became a key strategy in securing their survival in hostile and violent conditions.

The problem with all provisional strategies, particularly when they begin to work for the exceptional few, is that they rise to the level of ideology. Soon, black folks began to blame other black people for bringing the race down. The Respectables, as I like to call them, claimed that our refusal to practice chastity and piety and avoid crime led to our low esteem among white people. Taken to its extreme form, respectability politics will net you black people who don't love black people. Ben Carson and

Clarence Thomas are the chiefs among these antiblack Judas types.

But the Obamas themselves practiced and subscribed to a mild, everyday politics of respectability, too. During an infamous commencement address at historically black Bowie State University in 2013, the First Lady critiqued the propensity among black youth who had been taken in by the lure of celebrity. *“Today, instead of walking miles every day to school, they’re sitting on couches for hours, playing video games, watching TV. Instead of dreaming of being a teacher or a lawyer or a business leader, they’re fantasizing about being a baller or a rapper.”* This is the language of respectability. It comes from the same place as Sunday sermons that wag fingers at young men to pull up their pants. It comes from the same place as Barack Obama’s unique penchant for telling black men to be good fathers to their children, a message he never felt compelled to share with predominantly white audiences. The ways the Obamas engaged black audiences during their time in the White House were filled with what we might call the everyday respectability politics of our parents and grandparents, who implored us to “act like you got some sense” and “don’t make me have to come up to that school.”

The Respectables’ credo is twofold: you have to be twice as good to get half as far, and never let ‘em catch you slippin’. (But the Respectables ideally would say this in completely proper English, without my hip-hop era remix.) This sounds like good sense. It sounds like black people taking on the very high levels of personal responsibility that those on the right love to talk about so much. But it doesn’t acknowledge that when you are twice as good, white folks will resent you for being better. And all human beings deserve at least a few slips. It’s inhuman to demand otherwise. When we saw the Obamas exit their caravan and walk down the streets of Washington, D.C., smiling and waving on January 20, 2009, these guiding principles reached Great Commandment status. We felt our ancestors smiling. We felt new possibilities taking shape for our children. For once, America had let us win. The project of respectability had triumphed. It had proven that if black people would simply get educated, be upstanding and respectable, and work hard, they could be absolutely anything—even president.

Respectability politics are at their core a project in rage management.

But the respectability project was particularly burdensome for Michelle Obama. She was policed and critiqued from head to toe by every community, white, black, and in between. When she turned inward to focus on her children, a safe stance that made

her more palatable to broad American audiences, white feminists expressed disdain for her embrace of the “mom-in-chief” role, calling it antifeminist. They conveniently forgot that their ancestors had long claimed ladyhood uniquely for themselves, refusing, to the great chagrin of black women, to acknowledge that sisters of a darker hue were ladies, too. However, black women refused to cede the volatile turf of American ladyhood to white women, taking to public outlets to remind white women that it was a privilege for a black woman to be able to *just* focus on raising her kids. This battle to define ladyhood for ourselves, and to access its protections, was long-standing. I think again of Ida B. Wells being ejected from the ladies’ car after she had refused to sit in the smoky, filthy, segregated colored car of the train. A few years later, Anna Julia Cooper wrote about needing to use the bathroom at a train station. When she approached the doors, each was marked with a sign, one reading “for ladies” and the other “for colored.” Which sign should she, a consummate colored lady, choose?

To be a black woman is to be always confronted with these kinds of profane distinctions, to be asked to choose between your race and your gender. Black social life in the 19th century was marked for black women by a lack of access to the protections of ladyhood, and by a steadfast refusal among white people to make even gender distinctions among black people. Those ideas shaped the way in which Michelle Obama was both perceived and policed. There was a minor public outcry when she took her official White House portrait in a sleeveless dress. And there was the time U.S. Congressman Jim Sensenbrenner referred to her as having a big butt. One of the perks of being a lady is not being subject to people’s lewd, thinly veiled sexual commentaries. Michelle Obama enjoyed no such perks. It also bears noting that white people’s regulation of black women’s bodies in the public sphere is one reason that black people have been obsessed with outward appearance. Michelle Obama’s assent to ladyhood, despite these persisting obstacles, conquered that offensive history, proving that black women could be the arbiters of American femininity and style, too.

Meanwhile, Melania Trump represented everything that Mrs. Obama did not. During the 2016 campaign, not only were her educational credentials in question and her open brand of sexuality deemed antithetical to respectable American ladyhood, but in Mrs. Trump’s Republican National Convention speech, she plagiarized Michelle Obama. Yet this is the couple that the American people chose to succeed the Obamas in the White House. Meanwhile, Melania Trump was allowed to float above

criticism, even though she initially refused to live in the White House or to take on the social demands of First Ladyhood. Had Michelle Obama dared to be so resistant, we would never have heard the end of the insults and bellyaching of the American public. But Mrs. Trump is the beneficiary of America's silence.

Of course, on Inauguration Day, Michelle Obama was put out with this whole state of affairs. Being compelled by law and custom to hand the mantle over to someone who tried to obtain it by biting your beats is almost too much to bear. But it also is perhaps the most symbolic evidence of the failure of the project of African American respectability.

A black woman, descended from enslaved people, became the First Lady of a country that historically used black women's bodies merely to reproduce noncitizens. One of the most unique things about black women's experiences in this country is that we are the only group of people whose bodies have ever been legally mandated as the place that reproduced noncitizens. Indigenous women were never striving for their children to have American citizenship but rather sovereignty on their own terms. And Latina immigrant women who are unfairly maligned for giving birth to children on American shores are hated precisely because they too can pass on the rights of citizenship to their children, even if they have been denied access to it themselves. It is black American women whose bodily history is bound up with the burden of reproducing the condition of unfreedom for our children. It, therefore, meant something—possibly even everything—to have a black woman, descended from these black women, ascend to the highest role our nation designates for women (since the presidency still eludes us).

But by January 20, 2017, as Melania Trump stepped to the podium in her baby-blue suit, that project had proved itself unsustainable. African American respectability might bring us to the highest office in the land, but it could not ensure any level of long-term respect for black humanity, black womanhood, black manhood, or black childhood. During the Obama administration unarmed black men, black women, and black children had all been murdered by the police, while most of the offending officers never lost their jobs or freedom. So it made sense that Mrs. Obama showed up looking somber, as if she were attending a funeral.

The ponytail-bun was a way of saying: I'm fed up and ready to go.

Maybe Michelle Obama hasn't divested in respectability politics forever. Truth be told, they have served her well. But a well-timed diss can let you know the limitations of a way of thinking or mode of being in the world. If you weren't looking for it carefully, Lady Obama's class and social position might have allowed you to miss her microresistance. In myriad ways black women daily resist messages that try to shame us into submission or otherwise steal and kill our joy. That dissent doesn't happen just on national stages. Sometimes it goes down in the everyday spaces that black women frequent, spaces that are rife with misogynoir (hatred of black women) and that are tasked with the work of disciplining black women and girls into respectable ladyhood.

Individualized acts of eloquent rage have limited reach. But the collective, orchestrated fury of black women can move the whole world. This is what the Black Lives Matter movement has reminded us. There is something clarifying about black women's rage, something essential about the way it drills down to the core truth. The truth is that black women's anger is not the problem. "For it is not the anger of Black women," Lorde tells us, "which is dripping down over this globe like a diseased liquid. It is not [our] anger which launches rockets . . . missiles, and other agents of war and death." "Anger," she said, "is an appropriate response to racist attitudes."

By proclaiming that Black Lives Matter, the leaders of the Movement for Black Lives have been insisting that the American democratic project become as inclusive as it claims to be. White supremacist gaslighting insists that what the statement really means is "only black lives matter." But that is willful ignorance on the part of folks who refuse to see that the conditions that prompted the proclamation in the first place were conditions that tried to assert that black lives didn't matter, that they were disposable, and that black communities didn't deserve justice. Black women, therefore, stood up and said, "*We matter. Too. Also.*" I simply refuse to believe that white people don't know this.

Whether we are at work, at church, at school, in court, in the halls of government, or in the streets, the rage of black women and girls does the necessary work of pushing American democracy forward, of exposing its flaws, of dramatizing its injustices, of taking its violent beatings. Black women's rage isn't always healthy, particularly when we turn it on ourselves or on our children. But when we turn it outward and focus it on the powers that would crush us into submission and give back to us a mangled image of ourselves, black women's rage is a kind of power that America would do well to heed if it wants finally to live up to its stated democratic aims.

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