

Introduction

If we had any doubt that Barack Obama was the best candidate for the presidency of the United States, those reservations disappeared on January 3 when he won the Iowa caucus. Obama declared the win a “defining moment in history” and a clear signal that the American people agreed with his message of change. The Iowa caucus victory and its impact on the course of the Obama campaign also raised the visibility of Michelle Obama. For the first time, we were struck by the realization that if Barack Obama made history as the first African American President, his wife would become the first African American First Lady. The prospect of these two historic “firsts” was exhilarating. We joined millions, African Americans and other people of color, who began to believe that the impossible, a Black President in our lifetime, was possible.

Throughout the months after Iowa, like so many other Americans, we were increasingly engrossed in the day-to-day campaign news and emotionally vested in its outcome. We followed the course of the controversies that threatened to derail the campaign and applauded our new President-elect for his disciplined, calm, and steady response to each new attempt to end his quest for the presidency. And at the same time we developed a new respect and admiration for Michelle. She was becoming an increasingly visible and vocal presence at her

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husband's side, backing him or representing him as she spoke to audiences around the country. Through the worst of times and the best of times, she appeared to be an equal partner with her husband and matched him in style and substance. In his own words, Obama described Michelle as his "best friend, love of my life and rock of our family."

We got to know her better during the Democratic National Convention. "Each of us comes here tonight by way of our improbable journey." With these words, Michelle Obama began her speech on the eve of her husband's historic nomination as the party's candidate for President of the United States. As she continued, she described herself by the roles she considered essential elements that define who she is: a sister, wife, mother, and daughter. Her moving presentation left no doubt as to what she valued and confirmed our growing esteem and sense of solidarity with this woman.

When Michelle became the target of media misrepresentation and stereotyping, we saw her strength and resilience. We were incensed when she was accused of being un-American because of remarks, taken out of context, about being "really proud" of her country for the first time in her life. But *The New Yorker* magazine cover that depicted her as a gun-toting, terrorist, angry Black woman was the final straw! Black women, everywhere, felt the sting of indignation, decried this caricature and rushed to embrace and defend this beautiful, graceful, intelligent woman. We commended her ability to rise above the derision and distraction. On November 4, we greeted the historic election of Barack Hussein Obama with joy, excitement, hope, and optimism. Our feelings of love and sisterhood with Michelle, our future First Lady, were intertwined in the onslaught of our other emotions.

We have provided this backdrop because we believe that the idea for this book was planted during that "defining historic moment" when Barack Obama won the Iowa caucus. It

was watered, fertilized, and took root at various times during the long campaign as we became intimately and resolutely committed to the Obama campaign and its principal leaders, Barack and Michelle. We had long conversations about our belief that as an African American woman, our new first lady will have greater expectations and more rigorous demands placed upon her than previous first ladies. Further, in the back of our minds, usually unspoken but ever present, we have a heightened concern about the safety of the Obama family as they undertake this new position as the first family of this nation. A few days after the election on an unusually mild, sunny day in western New York, one of us said, "I have an idea" and the leaves and stems of a new seedling pushed through the earth!

The call for papers for a publication was sent out on November 11, a week after the election. We asked women to send us letters and creative writings to share with our incoming First Lady, noting that "as African American women, we want to send her a special message, grounded in our common ancestry and in the belief that our daughters have not only been inspired by her accomplishments but empowered by her example." The call went out through the Uncrowned Queens List-serve and on our website. It was picked up by other websites and list-serves, but one of the most dynamic methods for getting the word out was old-fashioned word-of-mouth. Given a brief time frame, inclusive of the Thanksgiving holiday, the call was very effective. We received over one hundred and fifty submissions in the three-week period. In fact, at this writing, we are still receiving calls and email with letters attached from women who are anxious to have their messages included in this publication.

How did they respond? These authors saw the call for letters as their chance to connect with one of their own and hoped that a personal letter or poem might be handed personally

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to the First Lady. Their writings are awesome. As if dressed for a celebration, their words danced on the page in scripts of elegance and style befitting a First Lady: Chicago, CAC Champagne, Lucinda Handwriting, Edwardian Script ITC, Rage Italic, and Onyx. The publisher requires Courier, in a 12-point font size. They wrote prayer-filled letters with solemn remembrances of distant and close ancestors. Their letters beautifully document the African American past on these shores. They tied themselves, Michelle, and all of us, to the African continent with solemn remembrance of the Middle Passage. They crafted breathtaking poetry like “Helium Hopes”: “You are my balloon tickling the feet of God, Favor filled, Celestially covered, And tied to my string, Is pride.” Sarmiento’s words shout from the page: “We hollered, we all screamed . . . shouted Hallelujah, . . . we sisters celebrated you MICHELLE OBAMA,” and from Amira Davis: “You are there because our mothers prayed.”

Who were these women? This is an era of digital danger with spam, phishing, identify theft, and high possibility of online crimes. There is endless but legitimate caution about strangers soliciting information online. We wondered about the public reaction to our request for letters. We asked ourselves: Who would respond to such a call for letters? Who would write to total strangers during the Thanksgiving holiday and even on the day itself? Who would send letters and poems from Blackberries while being driven to grandmother’s house for Thanksgiving dinner? Who would bare their souls in letters they only hoped could be read by First Lady Obama? Who would send emails around the world encouraging “Sistahs” to join them in writing a letter to the wife of Number 44? Realizing the importance of the moment for women of color, White women, many strong supporters of both Barack and Michelle, called their Black “Sistahs” and their Black daughter-in-laws and urged them to respond.

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Women with ancestry from the broad African diaspora responded, including countries in Africa, the islands of Jamaica and Puerto Rico, African Americans and First Nation's women across the United States. In brief biographies, respondents described themselves as hair dressers, office workers, retirees, leaders in Black women's organizations, tenured professors, university presidents, health care professionals, evangelists, business women, and senior citizens. Some described themselves as "just a simple person" needing to write to Michelle. From young mothers to octogenarians the letters came, all singing the praises of Michelle Obama. And, then, there were the poets, some poet laureates, whose early morning Muses dictated lyrical poems bringing tears with each reading like Arlette Miller Smith: "In anticipation of you coming from the south & side and shoulders of the sisterhood, We sing, pray . . . raise and lift you up for such a time as this."

Who did they speak for? These authors spoke in many voices as well as their own. They spoke for children lost prematurely, for their living and lost mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers. They spoke for their husbands. They spoke for children not yet in the womb but who could be welcomed now that Michelle was in what Mercier described as Rainbow House: "Never wanted to visit the White House till now . . . now that you and your family live there by proclamation of rainbow vote and universal prayer." In each letter, authors spoke of the presence of the spirit of our African ancestors. They called the names of former slaves from their families and the names of African American freedom fighters on whose shoulders we all stand like Fannie Lou Hamer, Nannie Helen Burroughs, and Ida B. Wells. Others remembered women of African antiquity like Queen Hatshepsut and others. Still others expressed reverence for the Black souls and spirits whose bodies had been in chains in the Middle Passage

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and the Mississippi Delta but whose spirits are “dancing all around Heaven,” in celebration of Michelle.

What did we accomplish? For the past decade, the primary work of the Uncrowned Queens Institute for Research and Education, Incorporated, has been to help African American women find their voice in saluting themselves, their friends, and community. Through the institute’s web page at www.uncrownedqueens.com, we invited them to tell their stories in their own words and we published their self-written biographies and their photographs online. This book is a continuation of that work. We are committed to maintaining a historic archive on how African American women viewed and documented this occasion for themselves and others.