

**The
BLACK
C o M M e n t a t o r**
Commentary, analysis and investigations
on issues affecting African Americans
www.blackcommentator.com

March 26, 2009 - Issue 317

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**What is the Image of Black Women Today?
Represent Our Resistance
By Dr. Lenore J. Daniels, PhD
BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board**

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This is a science that's called "image making." They hold you in check through this science of imagery.

-Malcolm X

When you begin to parade it as a public matter and shout in the street, you are reducing it to the same status.

-John Henrik Clarke

Last week, National Public Radio featured a discussion on First Lady Michelle Obama. The First Lady received her degree from Princeton and her law degree from Harvard. The host made sure to mention this. But the tease was Michelle Obama's *shoulders*. She exposed her *shoulders* at her husband's first State of the Union address! The First Lady has been out and about to schools in Washington D.C. reading to children - said in the parentheses, again. But those *shoulders*! The host and guests, one of which sounded Black, were never able to articulate why the press or the NPR's show teaser focused on Michelle Obama's *shoulders*.

The host and her guest came close: They mentioned in passing, the New Yorker cartoon with the Michelle Obama sporting a natural and carting a rifle, standing next to a turban-wearing Presidential candidate Barack Obama.

Close.

But the First Lady, the host and her women guest report, has settled into her "role as First Lady" and eased the minds of those who thought she was an "angry Black woman." She seems to have settled on being the First Lady as Mom, helping her daughters adjust to life in the White House. How original! Mammy in the White House is safe!

But wait! Its American radio! The host and her guests remind the audience that President Barack Obama refers to his wife often! She won't be making economic decisions but... He's said that their marriage is a *partnership*... What do you suppose that means... a partnership...? Michelle doesn't walk behind Barack; she walks *beside* him, even managing speaking engagements *apart* from him! A partnership? The First Lady is a Black woman, exposed shoulders and all, an *educated* Black American woman who is a *partner* of the beloved multi-racial Barack Obama. The beloved savior will confer with a *Black* woman! Could there be a "Sapphire" lurking behind Mammy?

Everyone talks at once! "The role of the First Lady... First Ladies have done this... First Ladies have done that..." Stop! But this isn't about a WHITE First Lady. This is about a Black American woman as "First Lady" in the White House! This began with the *shoulders*. Raise the fear level up for rating and now try to settle the minds out there in America - just a little! An exposed Black woman's *shoulders* and Americans send up a collective shudder. Under control it could be a permissible smidgen of sellable "scandal," a smidgen of "Sapphire"!

Could the *shoulders* at a State of the Union and the *partnership* between the Black President and the Black First Lady suggest a *hidden resistance* behind the walls of the White House? The listener of NPR is left with this image.

Those shoulders walking *beside* the King, contrary to Euro-American subjugation of women, is ancient as the Nile Valley civilization between Black women and men and fuels the imagination of the suspicious. This partnership will be subjected to further *surveillance*.

Not long ago, the first Black Congresswoman and first Black major-party candidate for President of the United States, Shirley Chisholm, knew such surveillance, but she would stare right back! When I saw the artist Kadir Nelson's "Shirley Chisholm" ([The Black Commentator, March 12, 2009](#)), I was taken aback. Chisholm looks straight at you, with arms folded, standing tall above the U.S. Capitol, positioned in a lower corner of the cartoon. It's Shirley Chisholm as *Shirley Chisholm*!

What a defiant pose? What an unfamiliar pose? Where do I see this image of a Black woman these days? Would such a similar image of a Black woman be published today? Would it be interpreted as the pose of "an angry Black woman," a "militant" Black woman?

I was struck by how I had become unfamiliar with the image of a strong Black woman in which the artist focused on *her head*, suggesting a mind bigger than life! Here was, no doubt, an awake and politically conscious woman. Here was inner strength, intellect, and yes, a body, appropriately attired so as to not distract from the fact that *she had business* and that was the business of challenging Washington D.C.'s rulers, barely visible, cowering in a lower corner of the portrait, well behind the portrait's warrior.

But we are here, today, where on the streets in urban cities, the marketers keep watch.

"One of the most prevalent images of black women in antebellum America was of a person governed almost entirely by her libido, a Jezebel character," writes Deborah Gray White in [*Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*](#) . An historical product, Jezebel is a creation along with "Mammy" and "Sapphire." While Mammy justified the enslavement of the Black woman, Sapphire ridiculed her outrage and insisted on her silence. Jezebel, on the other hand, legitimized the practice of miscegenation - the systematic rape and abuse of Black women by the white slaveholder. Jezebel, said the white slaveholder, made him do it! Jezebel is the wild one, the lustful one, the immoral, primal creature - the whore! Jezebel!

Today she appears in corporate-produced music videos and films. She appears in corporate produced advertisement. Similar to *Barbie* for many white Americans, *Jezebel* is the "given" image to aspire to and to imitate. Jezebel is stylish, modern - "American" with the "exotic" look. *Freedom* and *democracy* is the normalization of Jezebel reflected in clothing linked to the culture of capitalism, hair products to straighten the natural texture of hair, and shoes and accessories produced by enslaved labor, all shipped to your local mall "on demand." The return of the *Jezebel* signifies not only the employment of a political/cultural strategy to keep Black women's voices out of the serious discussions today in the world but also a means to deploy a marketable strategy for the use and abuse of the Black family / community through the Black women.

How frightened the rulers in Washington D.C. are of this image of Black women?

The continued surveillance of Black women reveals a well-nurtured diffusion of the potential for resistance. No fear, here, of stumbling upon an "angry Black woman" among drones. Free to flaunt the body and shake the bootie! Progress! A shoulder is not all the men will see! But here, more is better! More guarantees the death of our collective spirit and the impossibility of a united effort to resist or support strategies of battle against the rulers of white supremacy.

Demand and supply function in the interests of the capitalists. A people oppressed don't demand more inferior education for their children or more employment with low wages and no insurance plan. They don't demand more prisons and tougher sentencing for themselves and their community. What the oppressed do demand is never supplied. Freedom isn't "given" out to the oppressed. The State's marketers determine what is "given" out and what is withheld. Self-determination is out of the question.

Black women have embraced the look of professional "prostitutes."

I think of John Henrik Clarke's story. Dogs meeting in the streets don't close doors because they are of a breed that doesn't give a damn! "When you begin to parade *it* as a public matter and shout in the street, you are reducing *it* to the same status." But the Master has first and last word.

Where are we, Black women, today? We're "strutting our stuff," shouting, we've arrived at the Master's party. We're "mainstream" members of American society!

The marketers keep watch.

Shirley Chisholm, keenly aware of history and employment of the images to control and enslave Black woman, maintained that her partnership was with right, not might! But her tenacity and courage within the Black community, her resistance within the milieu of Washington, *her* image of freedom - is "old school." "New is the collusion with the racist, sexist, mechanisms of corporate capitalism, standing on the shoulders of collaborating victims.

Is there a better way to cover up the criminally corrupt and the morally bankrupt system of capitalism?


[For a related commentary, read Tolu Olorunda's, [Is the New Old Navy Commercial Racist?](#) In *The Daily Voice*.]


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The BlackCommentator Readers' Corner Blog

BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board member, Lenore Jean Daniels, PhD, has been a writer, for over thirty years of commentary, resistance criticism and cultural theory, and short stories with a Marxist sensibility to the impact of cultural narrative violence and its antithesis, resistance narratives. With entrenched dedication to justice and equality, she has served as a coordinator of student and community resistance projects that encourage the Black Feminist idea of an equalitarian community and facilitator of student-teacher communities behind the walls of academia for the last twenty years. Dr. Daniels holds a PhD in Modern American Literatures, with a specialty in Cultural Theory (race, gender, class narratives) from Loyola University, Chicago. Click [here](#) to contact Dr. Daniels.

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