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Will the Black Press Step Up to the Plate?

The Substance of Truth

By Tolu Olorunda

BlackCommentator.com Columnist

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"The media's the most powerful entity on earth. They have the power to make the innocent guilty and to make the guilty innocent, and that's power."

-Minister Malcolm X, The Power of Media (1964)

"America and most of its newspapers applauded me in Montgomery. And I stood before thousands of Negroes getting ready to riot when my home was bombed and said, 'We can't do it this way'... Oh, the press was so noble in its applause, and so noble in its praise when I was saying, 'Be nonviolent toward Bull Connor;' when I was saying, 'Be nonviolent toward Jim Clark.' There's something strangely inconsistent about a nation and a press that will praise you when you say, 'Be nonviolent toward Jim Clark,' but will curse and damn you when you say, 'Be nonviolent toward little brown Vietnamese children.'"

-Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., [Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence](#) (1967)

President Barack Hussein Obama II was sworn in as the nation's first African-American president on January 20th, 2009, but a stunning reality, in spite of this historic event, tames all notions of "how far we've come." As the President and his Press Secretary, Robert Gibbs, have stepped into the briefing room, they, along with the world, have been confronted by a sobering reality. The overwhelming number of journalists, whose job it is to reflect the diversity and novelty of the country, resemble the essential color of the building itself – white. Save for the presence of a few reporters (April Ryan, Suzanne Malveaux, Helen Thomas, etc.), Obama's White House briefing room refuses

to let go the demons of the past – *change we can believe in?*

The PBS host, Tavis Smiley, [took note](#) of this sad truth a couple of weeks ago: *"The media needs to look more like America... If we can have a president who is Black, why can't we make these other institutions reflect the diversity that is America? The problem is that... the same people who run these news operations, who don't want to put people of color in positions of power to cover these stories, are the very same people putting on tuxedos and Ball-gowns... to celebrate that there is a Black person in the White House."*

In the coming years, as the *snow-white* press corps seeks to challenge Obama on the pressing uses facing the country, of what use is the Black Press to an administration it helped cheerlead into victory? Is the Black Press willing to step up to the plate and hold Obama accountable, or does it prefer the *modest* role of defending him at all costs – in a pathetic attempt to ward off inevitable racist characterizations of the Black President?

In the last half-century – though long before then (a la *The Crisis*, *Freedom's Journal* and *The North Star*) – the Black Press has always functioned as the conscience of Western Journalism. From the publication of a picture bearing Emmett Till's disfigured head in Jet magazine, following the infamous 1955 lynching episode; to accurately documenting Dr. King/ Malcolm X's human-rights movement thereafter, and the hellish conditions Black and Brown folks were entrenched in; to remaining true to its vision during the rise of the Black Panthers, in the late '60s and '70s; to celebrating the barriers broken by Shirley Chisholm's historic presidential run in the '70s, and representing the true significance of Jesse Jackson's similar bid in the '80s, it's clear that Black journalists are an intricate part of the success and prosperity of the Black freedom movement. Certainly, the '90s would yield less encouragement, as the "first Black president" wined and dined the Black Press corps into crowning him a friend, ally and comrade of the Black Community – never mind the unprecedented spike in incarceration of Black males and females, through the 1994 crime bill; or the erosion of "welfare as we know it;" or his enactment of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which would siphon over 900,000 jobs from within disenfranchised communities – disproportionately black.

In the last decade, the Black Press has shown itself incapable of functioning within the racist cocoons of mainstream media. With all due and earned respect, one cannot expect journalists such as Suzanne Malveaux, Soledad O'Brien, or Eugene Robinson to accurately represent Blackness in a non-stereotypical way. CNN's exploration of what it means to be "Black in America" helped paralyze all possibilities of Black journalists telling our story with the truth front and center of the depiction. The CNN report, fronted by Soledad O'Brien, was overwhelmingly indicted as a [White supremacist misrepresentation](#) of Black American lifestyle. With scenes encouraging educators to pay Black students to attend school regularly, and another which featured the host pleading with a Black man to promote more consistency in his fatherhood responsibilities, the harsh response it received was quite logical. Numerous Op-Eds and Blog reviews saw right through CNN's devious motives, and never once wavered in calling it an [opportunistic stunt](#), packaged by a megalomaniac corporate empire to double ratings.

At CNN, and other mainstream networks, Soledad O'Brien is not alone in sponsoring racist and bigoted portrayals of Black figures. At TV and print headquarters, Black journalists are predominantly used as parrots to propagate racist perceptions, and analysis, of the Black American experience. That way, the white networks are unscathed in advancing their agenda, without being branded racists. Suzanne

Malveaux, *CNN* anchor and reporter, is a guru in this field of play.

During the media-created Rev. Jeremiah Wright fiasco, last summer, Ms. Malveaux was [privileged to interview](#) First Lady Michelle Obama, shortly after Dr. Wright's brilliant appearance at the National Press Club on April 28, 2008. Unlike the unbiased and serious journalist *CNN* would rather suggest she is, Ms. Malveaux admittedly went straight for the "headlines," as opposed to the "issues" most pertinent to voters. Asking Ms. Obama if Rev. Wright "betray[ed]" her by suggesting President Obama's denunciation was a political move, she proceeded to question the First Lady on "how painful" it was to watch the Press-conference a couple of days earlier. Ms. Obama's persistent desire to "move forward," and "stay focused" on issues of substance was no match for Malveaux's follow-up question to find out at what "point" the Obamas stopped "empathizing... with your pastor, and you thought, here's something that's over the line; it's over the top." Ms. Obama was bitterly wrong to hope Malveaux would "move into the next phase" and "talk about something else," as the veteran journalist informed the First Lady that *"[t]here are some people who I spoke with who have been trying, on your behalf, on your husband's behalf, to close this and to go to him [Rev. Wright] and say, look, you know, this is enough. Enough is enough... But they also describe him as someone who is vindictive, and perhaps there is no buttoning up when it comes to whether or not he's going to come out and talk again."* An displeased Michelle Obama would, [following the interview](#), scold Malveaux, reminding her that *"people don't care about this as much as you all do."* An intimidated Suzanne Malveaux would reply that perhaps they aren't as "curious" and "upset" as the National Press corps is. Michelle Obama, asking Malveaux to "welcome that" spirit of journalistic maturity, in order to "grow," left Malveaux at a loss for words. What the First Lady failed to point out is that Malveaux is simply a classic case of the normalized tradition of [appointing Black faces](#) as acceptable representations of White-Supremacist values.

If the Black Press is to collectively rise to the occasion of critiquing the current administration, when necessary, and holding it accountable to the promises and pledges made in the heat of the campaign, it must cease its current function as cheerleaders and baby-sitters for the Obama administration. In the '08 Presidential Race, the Black Press, with the exception of independent organizations (*a la* [BlackCommentator.com](#)), never once budged in its chillingly, disproportionate embracement of Obama's campaign, every step of the way. Its uncritical support of the president made Obama take Black folks less seriously in the course of the '08 presidential election.

As BC Editorial Board member and distinguished political analyst, Dr. Ron Walters, [would note](#), the Obama campaign completely ignored the works contributed by Black *Get Out the Vote* campaigns/groups. The Obama staff, acting independent of community-support, unleashed themselves into Black neighborhoods, when convenient, without any forewarning, or consent, from neighborhood organizations. Dr. Walters pointed out how such acts aroused reports of *"young Whites showing up in Black communities to register Black voters. While on the face of it this would be a good exercise in race relations, this is a game of community power. The power of the Black community in elections has always resided not only in its turnout, but in the fact that Black leadership controlled the turnout... One of the major objectives of the civil rights movement was not only to enable Blacks to vote in big numbers and to have their vote have an impact in the political system, it was that it should be controlled by Black leadership who would do the bargaining for issues with that system."* In his article on the topic, Dr. Walters would ask if Blacks derive some pride in the Obama campaign raising *"hundreds of millions of dollars, most of which... [went] into the White community."*

In the course of the 22-month long race, the Black Press, which received [minimal-to-no funding](#) from the Obama campaign, maintained its romantic affiliation with the Obama team, at all costs. What the Black Press must realize is that its usefulness lies in the ability to hold the feet of the president to the fire (even to the point of burning his toe nail), to guarantee a fulfillment of commitments made by, and on behalf of, the President to the Black Community and other neighboring communities. The Black Press should also take into account that the president's handlers/advisors are disproportionately of a hawkish and right-wing orientation. If the Black Press is ever relevant, it is now, more than ever.

In the coming years, the Black Press must stay vigilant of five key issues of grave concern to the Black Community:

- First Lady Michelle Obama: No other presidential spouse, in history, has been subjugated to the level of public and private castigation Michelle Lavaughn Robinson Obama experienced, in the 22-month long presidential race. Deemed, in one instance, a "[terrorist](#)," the microscopic lenses of liberal and conservative media would work in concert to diminish the integrity and dignity of the First lady. Obama's weak-kneed charge that critics "lay off my wife" was of little help, with news reports circulating lies, [perpetrated](#) by crackhead Rush Limbaugh, that the First Lady had used the word "whitey," on a tape, to describe folks of Caucasian descent. As expected, [FOX News was around](#) to lend all legitimacy to the blatantly false claim – the same network which still features a host who [expressed desire to lynch](#) Michelle Obama, for her lack of hyper-nationalism. Lest liberals get excited into thinking the demonization of Michelle Obama was a strictly conservative principle, Black folks (and gender activists across all stripes) should remember that very few left-leaning feminists reacted in outrage to the portrayal of Ms. Obama as a [gun-toting-sex-driven-drug-using bandit](#) on the *Huffington Post's* subsidiary website 23/6; or when a liberal blogger from the *Daily Kos* [created a photo](#) of Michelle Obama being lynched by *southern strategists*; or when the *New Yorker* magazine [slapped an Afro](#) on Ms. Obama's head, to go with the Ak-47 affixed to her shoulder. These countless incidents have, since Election Day, proven to be much more than "tasteless" experiments in the heat of a presidential campaign. Ever since Nov. 4th, the *Atlantic* has reduced the First Lady to an "[American Girl](#)," *TIME* Magazine has claimed her "[America's Next Top Model](#)," and mainstream media has attempted to [over-analyze](#) every segment of her fashion sense, following Inauguration Day, last Tuesday. These occurrences have taught us that conservative/liberal racist stereotyping of Michelle Obama appears to be an income-generating machine. If the Black Press is to take serious its responsibility to the Black community, it must build a shield of protection around the First Lady, to preserve the legacy of forerunners such as Callie House, Shirley Chisholm, Harriet Tubman, Barbara Jordan, Betty Shabazz, and Coretta Scott King.
- Malia and Sasha Obama: Just as Michelle Obama has been brought before the altar of unmerited attention (denigration), the daughters of the first family have had their share of silly, cynical and dangerous mischaracterizations, perpetrated by overfed pundits, slow-witted bloggers and avaricious marketing executives. On November 13, 2008, the liberal website, *Huffington Post*, saw no wrongdoing in labeling the 7-year-old daughter of the Obamas as "[sassy](#)." The *Huffington Post* helped set the stage for toy-company TyGirlz line's creation of "Sweet Sasha" and "Marvelous Malia" dolls, last month. [Calling it](#) an "inappropriate" gesture, on the path of the greedy capitalists, Michelle Obama has taken an enviable step in ensuring the security and privacy of her daughters. The Black Press should follow suit.

- Rev. Wright: The media-created Rev. Wright controversy was an historic low in western journalism. Searching for a way to derail President Obama's candidacy, corporate pundits utilized the ancient methodology of divide and conquer, in the Black Community. Digging a pothole in the middle of Obama's road to history, mainstream journalists forced Obama to denounce the man who helped rescue him from a pitiful state of self-hatred and identity-confusion. All TV Networks covered the Reverend's every move, like a shadow on a sunny day. Veteran journalists tossed their impartial hats over the wall of sensationalism, for an opportunity to watch President Obama crack under pressure. With the five, and occasionally fifteen, second sound-bytes of Rev. Wright's previous sermons being endlessly looped on corporate TV stations, the stage was set for a dramatic showdown between the prophet and the politician. When a "fair and balanced" journalist [plays sliced clips](#) from Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr.'s former sermons, as "things I consider hate," all notions of objectivity in mainstream news reports of the artificial Rev. Wright controversy ought not pass the smell test. The predominantly white press [violated the sacredness of the Black Church](#), stripped his sermons of all context and theological meaning, and repackaged Rev. Wright, a renowned theologian, scholar and marine, as a hate-monger who was hell-bent on impeding President Obama from clinching victory in his political conquests. Whilst the White Press unleashed its tirade of ignorance unto the scene, the Black Press, as a collective body, either remained tight-lipped, or played along with the tune. The Black Press' cowardly indifference to mainstream media's "attack on the Black church" is unacceptable and profoundly disturbing. Its inability to correct the uninformed majority of White pundits gives ample leverage to journalist such as Dana Milbank of the *Washington Post*, who, last week, [equated streaming organs](#) in Black churches to the music played at award-shows, when a recipient goes overboard. The Black Press' acquiescence enables grossly uninformed characters like Milbank all space and time to exhibit their severe lack of knowledge on the history and formation of the Black church – let alone its prophetic/liberation wing.
- Mainstream Media Sensationalism: One of the greatest drawbacks of Obama's historic bid was the unraveling of a hyper-sensationalistic press. As the media sought to come to terms with its inability to reflect the diversity of the country, through its staff, it engaged in an irritating habit of sticking microphones in front of the most vulnerable-looking Black people, with a cynical and snide snarl: "What does this mean to you?" Most curious to observant eyes – such as BC Publisher, Peter Gamble – however, was the monolithic response supplied by all those questioned. With the understanding that not all Blacks are overwhelming supporters of Barack Obama, and not all feel a sense of regeneration in the concept of a Black President, mainstream medias' wily selection of only those willing to corroborate the media-driven myths about equality for all, is quite telling of the future of corporate journalism. With Obama's rise to prominence, white journalists have [appointed themselves](#) as the moderators on *Race* matters. Initially deeming the President a "race-transcending" candidate, the incoming narrative began taking shape with a subsequent description of his White supporters as "color-blind" voters, who had helped push our society into a "post-racial" reality. Nothing comes off more disturbing than the words of TV-host, Larry King, who, on his show last Thursday, [informed](#) Journalist Bob Woodward that, "My younger son Cannon, he is eight... now says that he would like to be black... He said there's a lot of advantages. Black is in. Is this a turning of the tide?" Larry King's disturbing and insulting comments aside, more troubling is the fact that author and journalist, Tavis Smiley, was a guest on the program that night, and simply chuckled, upon hearing such filth from the talk-show host. If Smiley

endorses sentiments such as Obama's election being a "turning of the tide" for Black folks, the progressively worsening conditions of our communities notwithstanding, it would explain his docility – especially as someone who wouldn't give Obama a pass a year ago, as a measure of, as he put it, love for Black people. Smiley, [who rightly called](#), amidst death threats and vitriolic resentment, that Obama be held accountable to the Black Community, has got some serious explaining to do. The Black Press must set its sight on the juvenile antics of unenlightened journalists, like Larry King, who have an audience, and spew untruths about the racial reality of the 21st century.

- **Racial Reality:** In the last two years, Obama's presence on the national scene has successfully put to bed all claims that Blacks and other numerical-minority communities confront artificial barricades in their personal and professional lives. A [CBS/New York Times poll](#), taken a week before the election, documented 43% of the Blacks surveyed as consenting to the notion that Blacks and Whites now have "about an equal chance of getting ahead." A [recent CNN poll](#), conducted a few days before the inauguration would raise the stakes, with 69% of Blacks surveyed reporting that Dr. King's Dream "has been fulfilled," in the 45 years since his landmark 1963 speech at the Lincoln Memorial. Perhaps a connection can be made between the timing (moments of elation, ecstasy and blurred vision) of these highly upsetting data, and the questionable (thoughtless) confessions of Black folks to a non-existent reality, but the damage of mainstream press on the psyche of the Black collective consciousness is quite clear. If the Black Press does not intervene timely, the day will soon come – and perhaps has already arrived – when the issues of racial profiling, driving while black, unfair mortgages, unequal legal representation, disproportionate sentencing, etc., will be dismissed as fantasy-controlled initiatives.

With the presence of a dominant press which seeks to challenge historical racial narratives, the Black Press must step up to the plate and keep vibrant the legacies of truth and justice in this 'age of Obama.' If there was ever a time when, as Dr. King put it, "silence is betrayal," it is now. The Black Press has a well-stated responsibility, and I, humbly, urge that it perform to the best of its ability and conscience.

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BlackCommentator.com Columnist, Tolu Olorunda, is an 18-year-old local activist/writer and a Nigerian immigrant. Click [here](#) to reach Mr. Olorunda.

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