

A EULOGY FOR ZADDY,

FORMER PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA

By Matt Ford

I couldn't possibly have picked a better year to do an exchange at Morehouse. My first semester alone saw the expansion of Safe Space into the new Center for Gender and Sexual Diversity, a screening of *Moonlight*, Alice Walker's heart-warming Fall Convocation speech at Spelman, and my participation in the election of the century as a registered Georgia voter.

The spring semester shaped up to be an interesting adventure, opening with Angela Davis's poignant MLK Day Speech at Spelman, a screening of *I Am Not Your Negro*, the ousting of Morehouse President Wilson (and the subsequent media and legal action taken by the Student Government Association against the Board of Trustees), the Falcons' final NFC Championship win at the Georgia Dome, and my attending the sesquicentennial Morehouse Pilgrimage to Augusta.

And of course, on Friday, Jan. 20, my Black President and First Lady gave up their ghosts and ascended to Heaven. After all, my friend did say that 2016 was a year of endings.

I spent the morning of the Inauguration in bed and missed hot breakfast at the Caf. Over slices of pound cake and a banana, Safe Space president Ramon and I discussed grad school prospects, ignoring CNN's coverage of the Inauguration on the TV screen behind me.

Later that evening, a Vassar friend road-tripping from Florida to New York with three of their high school friends, all children of immigrants of color, made a pit stop in ATL. We piled into a blue two-door sedan to get ice cream, dedicating the day to surrounding ourselves in the warm company of people of color.

The only thing I remember about the Inaugural Funeral was Michelle's decidedly I-don't-give-a-fuck outfit. Donning a burgundy dress and coat, slicked back bun, and an unamused countenance, even when the incoming First Lady offered a rather suspect Tiffany box, she arrived to the funeral ready to leave. Days later, I found myself both smiling and shuttering at photos of the Black President and First Lady, unable to genuinely pay my respects. I was mourning, particularly for her husband (I can never really get enough of Michelle herself, who will never really die).

I miss Barack Obama. I miss the dashing smile that won him initial and perpetual popularity. I miss cackling at memes of him dropping the mic and gently shaking white hands before codeswitching to a dap for Black hands. I miss lines like "folks wanna pop off" and "wha gwan Jamaica." I miss watching Black people swoon with Obama dancing to Black music at fabulous Black parties at the Black House televised on the Black Entertainment Network.

That Negro got swag.

At the same time, homie was flawed as fuck. Here I am at the intersection of Morehouse College and Barack Obama. Morehouse is a school that prizes respectability and representation. The campus is decorated with signs reminding students to guard their “integrity” and to “exhibit agency.” In the center of the eastern portion of campus is a giant white phallus and a bronze statue of Dr. King, standing before the International Chapel bearing his name, pointing toward Graves Hall in the distance.

Barack Obama’s political persona was similar. In many ways, he was here to make white people comfortable. As a panelist said during a session at the daylong Feb. 20 Barack Obama Day on campus, the Black president was obligated to lie and equate Black people experiencing Jim Crow with white people protecting their supremacy by complaining about the “unfairness” of affirmative action.

It is easy for the Black community to critique the man in the highest office in the land, like it is easy for Barack Obama to blame us for our oppression. However, contrary to our current president’s opinion, there is only one truth. The lie begins when our leaders deny the truths of the oppressed, neglecting our lived narratives, and failing to make promises when their success no longer depends on our voices. As Angela Davis said in her MLK speech at Spelman, Barack Obama, in his second term, stopped talking about poor Black people. In fact, he very rarely spoke critically of race at all during his eight years.

We had hope — and, by God, we quite literally live on it. In both 2008 and in 2012, we saw droves of Black folks of all ages volunteering for his campaign, chanting, “Yes, we can!” on a serious quest for a new country. We, for a moment, and for many moments after that, thought we could make a home of America.

And why? Surely, we as Black folks know that this country was built by us, not for us. Mama said so herself that she woke up “every morning in a house that was built by slaves.” If Indigenous folks are still fighting an uncivil war on their own land, attention withdrawn from #NoDAPL and entirely turned toward the new president’s Inauguration and tenure, why do we continue attempting to convince ourselves that America’s attention span can last long enough to give a damn about Black people? We have stopped paying close, extremely close, attention to our history, our current wellbeing, and our future in effort to make a new home.

Whose home is this?

Well, we’d have to begin with our notions of home. We think of home within the construct of the nuclear family. Michelle was Mama, Malia and Sasha were our siblings, and Obama was our absent father whom we deemed our baby daddy — err, Zaddy, cause the man is fine as hell — the baby being, well, ourselves. We felt like he owed us his paternalism. He owed us salvation. But I’m all grown up and his child support duties are no longer needed.

Obama’s presidency often felt like Black America’s emotionally abusive relationship with a man who promised most love and care but delivered the least. Yes, Obama did many wonderful and unprecedented things. He offed Osama Bin Laden within the first two years of his tenure, a task which Bush found totally impossible. Obama saved the auto industry, raised employment rates, and helped us climb out of one of the roughest recessions in American history. He tried to give us universal healthcare.

And he ultimately captured our hearts nearly every day, like in the now historic photo of him bending over to allow then 5-year-old Jacob Philadelphia to touch his hair to confirm that it felt like his own. "Touch it, dude!" our Black president said when the curious little Black boy hesitated.

But we loved Obama more than he loved us. We can say that he was under so much pressure, an obvious truth, but we cannot excuse the many times he failed to properly perform daddy duties. Obama was the type of daddy who staved off the children who supported (and forgave) him most, like invitations to speak to the Congressional Black Caucus for two years before he finally offered something of a pep talk and five years later commanded them to 'educate' their foes, just months before leaving office. He's the type of daddy who supported a candidate with a sketchy telecommunication history, who equated Beyoncé and Laverne Cox endorsements with tangible support of Black lives, and who is ultimately a hoity-toity, untrustworthy sore loser. He's the type of daddy who created educational programming for his apparently most beloved children, via My Brother's Keeper, only to admonish said children to their faces on graduation day just months after his reelection.

Zaddy gave unapologetically tough love.

We rely so heavily on the president for everything. We do not imagine government systems having less control of our lives. We must let go of our paternalistic view if we are to fight this battle for freedom, if we believe that Obama is still alive. But sure, we can hold out faith for Zaddy, who may now center Black people in his political work through his foundation and later return to Chicago as a grassroots community organizer.

Ten days before Inauguration Day, Obama delivered his farewell speech. I hoped for a moment that BJ the Chicago Kid, delivering the National Anthem in the President's hometown, would perform "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing" instead. But it was not so. And as daddy spoke, I hoped to feel a sense of solace, to feel, I suppose, united. To feel the pride that Obama spoke with every time he addressed his children as his "fellow Americans." But I did not.

Obama spent his final speech to the American people delivering a thinly veiled message to No. 45 urging citizens to protect our democracy. Perhaps it is not our parents but our democracy that died. We outgrew mommy and daddy's home, and they're off to bigger and better tasks in relative quietude. And we mourn our democracy.

In a Jan. 19 letter to his "fellow Americans" posted to his Obama White House Medium account, the most highlighted comment is, "And when the arc of progress seems slow, remember: America is not the project of any one person. The single most powerful word in our democracy is the word 'We.' 'We the People.' 'We shall overcome.'"

I, like my fellow Americans who embraced the line, continue to have hope (err, rather militant hope these days), a hope renewed when Zaddy returned from vacation with a bright glow, emerging from a New York hotel surrounded by thousands who would be satisfied if they could only catch a glimpse of the Messiah.

A link at the end of the letter led to a page where readers can "memorialize" his presidency by sharing their "Obama story" at the Obama Foundation center and website. Adjacent to the submission form is an angelic photo of our parents. Michelle looks blissfully into the distance, her

right hand placed over her heart and her left hand on Barack's crossed leg, who looks lovingly at his wife, a look that grew so familiar to the American people throughout his tenure. Symbols of the romantic American Dream, a love so hopelessly/hopefully longed for by all who revered the Obamas. A symbol of love that perhaps only lives in Heaven. What a nice image.