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Gabrielle Douglas' Hair-Raising Experience

If you don't follow Olympic gymnastics, you may not have heard about Gabrielle Douglas before this year. But the amazing grace of this 16-year old African American propelled her to Olympic gold last week, and she is the first African American to win an individual medal in gymnastics.

Indeed, her performance toppled the Russians, who have portrayed themselves as unbeatable. So unbeatable, as a matter of fact that the winner of the silver medal, Viktoria Komova, “sobbed uncontrollably,” because she so expected to win.

This calls for unqualified celebration. Sneaking into some of the celebratory comments, though, were snarky and rude comments that many reserve to tarnish African American accomplishment and victory. Channel surfing in the talk radio space, these comments came in two categories, equally objectionable.

First, there were comments about Gabrielle's hair. As the young gymnast did her thing, there were many – including some self-hating African American women – who commented that her hair wasn't up to par. Shades of the comments about Michelle Obama. I'm not sure what style would be appropriate for a gymnast, but let's celebrate Gabrielle's medal instead of railing on her hair. Are we still stuck on the Spike Lee version of “straight or nappy” as a contrast?

When Don Imus insultingly uses the word “nappy,” we Black Folks



BENNETT COLLEGE

Julianne Malveaux

are up in arms, as we should be. But when sisters excoriate an accomplished young woman, there are those who nod their hair in agreement. When will we, Black women, get over this hair thing?

The only thing I want to hear about Gabrielle Douglas is how amazing her victory was, and how inspirational she will be for other young women.

And when will we stop playing into other people's stereotypes? To be honest, hair was the last thing on my mind when I saw Gabrielle's stunning performance. Why was anyone thinking of hair?

In addition to thinking of hair, some commentators were thinking of fatherhood. Where was her dad, too many asked? One radio talk show host took a whole five minutes ruminating on absent dads. But the truth is that while Gabrielle's mom, Natalie Hawkins, and her dad, Timothy Douglas, are divorcing, Douglas, a soldier who has served both in Iraq

and Afghanistan, is very much part of her life. He was present for the Olympic trials, but had responsibilities that kept him from the rest of the games. His presence or absence should not be the fodder for speculation.

I wouldn't mind the commentary so much if the same folks spent any time speaking of the economic plight of African American men. The most recent jobs report shows that while the unemployment rate ticked up from 8.2 percent in May to 8.3 percent in June, the rate for African American men

rose from 14.2 to 14.8 percent. Unofficial rates would put African American male employment near the 25 percent mark.

Furthermore, alternative sets of data more effectively explore the plight of African American men. The employment-population ratio, which measures the percentage of men aged 10 to 65 who are working, shows that 57.7 percent of African American men in that age group have jobs, which means that more than 40 percent do not.

More than two of three African American men, then, do not have work, yet this statistic is rarely dis-

cussed. In contrast, the employment-population ratio for White men was 68.4 percent, a full 10 percentage points higher than the rate for Black men. Timothy Douglas is employed, and he is, indeed, defending our country. Why is his presence or absence at the Olympic games subject to mean-spirited discussion, when it is clear that he supports his daughter?

It is easy to suggest that the Tea Party attacks on President Barack Obama have made it “open season” on Black people among the commentariat. And certainly, coverage of the president and his family has been rife with stereotypes. Still, Tea Party attacks can't explain the ways that some African American women have talked about Gabrielle Douglas' hair. In the face of caustic comments about Black people from outsiders, must we turn on ourselves?

The only thing I want to hear about Gabrielle Douglas is how amazing her victory was, and how inspirational she will be for other young women. All of America ought to celebrate this victory because Ms. Douglas brought the gold home, not for herself, but for our nation. The stereotypes are simply unacceptable, whether African Americans or Whites are wallowing in them.

Julianne Malveaux is a Washington, D.C.-based economist and writer. She is President Emerita of Bennett College for Women in Greensboro, N.C.

Walmart and Under-Employment

As University of California-Berkeley Labor Center Professor Steven Pitts regularly notes, African Americans not only face a crisis of lack of jobs, but we also face a crisis centering on the quality of those jobs. In fact, “underemployment” has been a recurring theme in Black America, where we find ourselves forced into jobs that are low wage, few (if any) benefits, and insufficient hours.

Walmart, for all of its fancy advertising and suggestions of a family-friendly environment, is one of the main perpetrators of underemployment on the U.S. scene and this has particular ramifications for Black America. Walmart, the largest employer in the USA (which has a workforce that is 18 percent African American), and a very significant multinational corporation, is the quintessential representative of everything that is wrong with the current U.S. economy. At the top, the Walton family is among the richest in the country, with more wealth than the bottom 42 percent of the population. By contrast, Walmart associates (employees) are at the other end of the ladder. At salaries of an average of \$8.81/hour, paying for healthcare insurance becomes nothing short of overwhelming.

The Walmart example is important to note because it points to the fact that a demand for jobs must be qualified with a few



TRANS AFRICA

Bill Fletcher Jr.

additions. First things first: workers in the USA do not live part-time lives; they do not have partial rents or mortgages or partial gro-

The Walton family is among the richest in the country, with more wealth than the bottom 42 percent of the population

cery bills. Holding jobs that keep you near the federal poverty line is of little help when you are trying to cover the expenses of a family. Yes, having a job is better than

piece together additional work or additional hours just to break even.

There is little pressure on Walmart to change. The company is often quite strategic in donating funds to various causes so that their profile is beyond reproach. Yet the workers in their various stores do everything that they can to keep a smile on their faces and to keep standing with some degree of respect. Consumers go to Walmart stores in search of bargains, rarely ques-

tioning why this company is able to make so much money and why the workforce scrapes by. Nor do they stop and ponder the fact that for all of its rhetoric, Walmart is

There is little pressure on Walmart to change

not having a job, but the scourge of underemployment means that you have to run around trying to

a net destroyer of jobs, costing 3 jobs for every 2 “created.” Their business model, in fact, under-

mines existing, local retail jobs.

There is no particular reason that the wages and benefits of the Walmart workers need be so low. The profits accumulated by the company could adequately raise the compensation of a very hardworking workforce without creating much of a dent in the halls of avarice of the Walton family. Many Walmart workers realize just this and they have begun to organize for justice. Known as Organization United for Respect at Walmart (OUR Walmart), this organization of workers—which is not a union but has the support of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union—has been pressing Walmart for justice and respect.

[See: Hadley Malcolm and Jayne O'Donnell, “Some Walmart workers want better wages, affordable benefits,” 6/8/2012] Without greater attention, and certainly in the absence of community support, their cause will be a very uphill struggle.

Perhaps it is time for the rest of us to give a damn. It is not just about the Walmart workers; it's also about our community.

Bill Fletcher, Jr. is a Senior Scholar with the Institute for Policy Studies, the immediate past president of TransAfrica Forum, the co-author of Solidarity Divided and the author of “They're Bankrupting Us – And Twenty Other Myths About Unions.”