

Michelle Obama: Redefining the (White) House-wife

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Michelle Obama presents a complex picture of modern America—she embodies the combined efforts of the Modern Civil Rights and Feminist movements at a time when many Americans are launching bitter reprisals against the institutional measures that have allowed such progress to take place. In the face of discrimination, exacerbated by the intersectional space of race and gender which her body occupies, Michelle Obama was (and continues to be) faced with the tasks of assuaging the larger racialized fears that a Black body often represents in the American imagination, dismantling the damaging stereotypes about Black women, and assuming an identity that is well-received by the American voting public. At the same time, she must also embrace the gendered labour required of a First Lady -- she must be a wife and mother who is patriotic, gracious, well-spoken, politically fluent and inoffensive in carriage and manner. In Michelle Obama's speeches and interviews throughout her husband Barack Obama's presidential campaign, she used discourse to cultivate an identity that was both legible and palatable to a broad American audience – it was a strenuous task and one that I examine in this paper.

Recent works have analyzed Obama's performance of White femininity as First Lady, discussed voters' perceptions of her in the campaign, compared her favorability to preceding first ladies, and discussed her historical and social significance as a Black First Lady (Burrell, Elder, & Frederick; McAlister; Parks, Roberson, & Quinetta; Spillers; Williams). However, few, if any, analyze the Obama's campaign performance as a rhetorical production or examine the variability of her rhetorical performance in front of different audiences over time. Moreover, other works on First Lady rhetoric have often excluded considerations of race, neglecting Whiteness as a defining component of First Lady and presidential identity (Parry-Giles & Blair; Wertheimer). This paper aims to introduce a new conversation about the construction of Obama's rhetorical campaign persona in relationship to race and gender, with an emphasis on viewing the woman we know as Michelle Obama as another presidential campaign production, edited, revised, polled, focus-grouped, and crafted. As Colleen Elizabeth Kelley notes, "political rhetoric is about storytelling" - in the following pages, I hope to elucidate the campaign story that is told both *about* and *by* Michelle Obama (281).

Though presidential and First Lady rhetoric have largely been studied in isolation from one another, Obama's presence in the 2008 election reveals that, in practice, the speech of the First Lady functions *as* presidential rhetoric. As prospective First Ladies have become increasingly more educated, accomplished and engaged in the public sphere over the course of American history, they have been dispatched to speak to potential voters on their husbands' behalf¹(MacManus & Quecan). Moreover, political husbands' have frequently cited their wives'

activism and professional experience as assets in their own presidential candidacy. Obama was no exception and, in fact, the use of her biographical narrative in the 2008 campaign reflects the importance of the First Lady's function in assisting her husband to realize his ambitions.

The first two sections of this essay will look at the rhetorical function, appeal and significance of Obama's carefully composed biographical narratives in supporting her husband's bid for presidency. I also look specifically at different speeches she gave to diverse audiences in order to better understand how she invoked or excluded race and gender identity. The second part of this paper will discuss the inherent difficulty of Obama's performance and construction as a Black First Lady in the context of American racism and sexism. In this paper, I examine four of Obama's speeches given during the 2007-2008 campaign season in order to analyze how Obama either employed or excluded race and gender when presenting herself in front of different racial and gendered audiences. This study first recognized that the presence of race and gender language would vary depending upon the audience to which Obama delivered her speech. My use of selected Obama speeches shows her attempts to vary her identification with listeners by adapting her "rhetorical persona" (Gill & Whedbee, p. 166), invoking a specified "argument" (Gill & Whedbee, p. 171), and appealing to a shared belief system.

This project does not aim to be a comprehensive summation of Obama's discourse or her performance on the campaign trail. Rather, I hope to contribute to the ongoing scholarly conversation that seeks to elucidate the many ways in which her presence and words provide key insights regarding the expectations and demands of First Ladies, wives, mothers, Black women and political spouses in contemporary society. In all, examining Obama's 2008 bid for First Lady reveals the ways in which Black female identity can be both deployed and under-examined in political and public spheres that rely on stereotypical race and gender frames in the midst of an unfamiliar social and political landscape.

In Her Own Words

Unlike other spokespersons, the First Lady's attachment to the President is presumed to be permanent, binding, established through familial ties, based on close physical proximity and personal selection, and rooted in intimate knowledge. A First Lady reflects her husband—her attributes are presumed to be his, her temperament is judged in part by what the public is shown of their relationship and the relationship they have with their children. As a result, she serves as an extension of the President himself. Thus, I argue that a First Lady's words become her *husbands'* words—her experiences meld with his biography, her choices reflect her husband's beliefs, her skills become his political tools – and her weaknesses can easily become his political liability.

By regularly drawing crowds of 1,000 or more people (Wolffe) Michelle Obama showed herself to be a major force as Barack Obama's political proxy. Much of Obama's success was due to her exceptional public speaking skills with which she expertly engaged her audience-- one *Time* magazine reporter described it as her "off -the-cuff charm" and "her ability to relate to

regular people” (Sittenfield). No doubt, her education and professional training contributed significantly to her ability to perform on the public stage. The rest of her appeal lay in numerous factors outside of her own control, including her race, gender, and easy-to frame-upbringing.

As an African-American raised by two Black parents in the inner-city, Obama’s race was a prominent part of her campaign identity. On the one hand, Barack Obama’s primary caregivers were his White mother and grandparents, making his racial alliances unclear for both Black and White voters. News reporters and columnists frequently suggested that his questionable racial credentials explained his initially weak support among African Americans (Deggans, 2007; East African, 2007; Fletcher, 2007; Mundy, 2007). Black public figures, too, doubted his racial commitments – for example, famed civil rights leader Reverend Jesse Jackson accused him of “acting White” and “talking down to Black people” (Bacon). On the other hand, Michelle Obama’s racial identity had no such ambiguity and was particularly helpful in reaching potential Black voters, who often view political speech “as positive when it comes from an African American politician” (Mendelberg & Oleske, 182). Her presumed connection to the Black community was a regular topic in feature articles during the election (Collins, 2008; Knight, 2008; Langley, 2008). In news reports, writers frequently highlighted her experience as a Black undergraduate at Princeton and her undergraduate thesis about the way Blacks were marginalized at the university (Ressner). Some argued that Obama’s perceived racial alliances helped garner Black support for her husband, with one *Newsweek* writer reporting that she was “deployed to speak directly to the fears of Black audiences in a way that Barack Obama often [did] not” (Wolffe).

In one important television interview in February 2008, a correspondent asked Obama about why her husband was still trailing Hillary Clinton in African American support according to recent polls. Obama’s seemingly unscripted response was powerful and emotional:

I’m completely confident, Black America will wake up and get it. But what we’re dealing with in the Black community is just, the natural fear of possibility. You know, when I look at my life, the stuff that we’re seeing in these polls has played out my whole life. Always been told by somebody that I’m not ready, I can’t do something, my scores weren’t high enough. You know there’s always that doubt in the back of the minds of people of color, people who’ve been oppressed and haven’t been given real opportunities, that you never really believe—that you believe that somehow, someone is better than you. Deep down inside you doubt whether you can do it because that’s all you’ve been told is “no, wait”. That’s all you hear. And you hear it from people who love you not because they don’t care about you but because they’re afraid, they’re afraid that something might happen... That’s the psychology that’s going on in our heads, in our souls, and I understand it. I know where it comes from. And I think that it’s one of the horrible legacies of racism, and

discrimination and oppression. It keeps a people down in their souls” (Transcribed from her interview on Morning Joe)²

This quote is important, not just because it provided insight into Obama’s beliefs about race and racism, but because it also allowed Obama what seemed to offer a nuanced and complex understanding of color-based power and marginalization in the United States. As she spoke openly about how oppression shapes her life and views about herself, voters were able to see her as a person who has doubted herself through the disbelief of others. And, implicitly, viewers see the ways in which both race and gender, though unmentioned, have set obstacles in her path. Thus, racial sincerity was key to Obama’s performances of Blackness (i.e., inner-city, public school, marginalized minority at Harvard and Princeton) and Black respectability. As John Jackson explains, “sincerity presumes a liaison between subjects” an interaction in which racial scripts are interpreted and performed in a way that “can feel so obvious, natural, real, and even liberating” even within the narrow conceptions of a racialized body. He continues: “racial sincerity exemplifies an epistemologically distinct rendering of race, identity, solidarity, and reality” (12). Though Obama claimed otherwise (Brooks), the contention that she served as Barack’s surrogate for Blackness in the campaign was frequently repeated in media portrayals throughout the campaign.

Michelle Obama’s role in the campaign was also generally perceived as a resource in helping her husband win the support of another key group in the American electorate: women. Rallying the support of female constituents was also especially important during the 2008 Democratic primaries, when Hillary Clinton was Barack Obama’s major rival and carried a strong base of women voters. As a Harvard and Princeton-educated lawyer with a well-lauded career, Michelle Obama could counter Clinton’s appeal by demonstrating an equally strong female presence and gifted oratory in frequent campaign appearances. In aspiring to the gendered position of First Lady, Obama’s public persona was also bolstered by her ability to present a more palatable feminine image of an accomplished woman than Hillary Clinton. As a presidential candidate, Clinton could be easily undermined by what political scientist Robert P. Watson describes as the media’s tendency to frame women in politics “through a feminine lens [...] focus[ing] more on her clothing, hair style, family, and other “soft” matters”(103). Research has also shown that there is a major political disadvantage for female candidates who present stereotypically feminine characteristics (Huddy & Capelos). Where such a sexist gaze could hurt Hillary Clinton’s careful gender negotiation in the Presidential limelight, it could only compliment and bolster Obama as an aspirant for a traditionally female role.

The Clinton campaign’s overt support of her masculinist performances as a presidential candidate shows that her strategists were sensitive to this issue. As scholar Eileen T. Walsh points out, “the press consistently portrayed Hillary Clinton as a mythical man [and] attribute to

² MSNBC – 11/13/07. Transcribed from a YouTube clip of Morning Joe episode <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rfddUIU1LR0> on 11/15/08.

her those characteristics of hegemonic masculinity: tough, self-sufficient, stoic” (125). Walsh further explains that the campaign’s own surrogates and supporters often took opportunities to strengthen Clinton through the deployment of White masculinist tropes.

Gov. Mike Easley (D, NC) said Clinton is so determined ‘she makes Rocky Balboa look like a pansy’. A few days later, as a union leader introduced Clinton... [he] stated the U.S. needed a leader ‘that has testicular fortitude, that’s exactly right and that leader is Hillary’. There was no outcry from her campaign... In fact, Clinton surrogate James Carville... quipped: ‘if she gave [Obama] one of her cojones, they’d both have two’ (126).

The emasculation of Barack Obama, of course, plays into a specific history of racism targeted towards Black men within the United States. As such, the Clinton platform drew on both White privilege and patriarchy through the employment of these masculinist frames.

With such heavy reliance on the male posture that Clinton had assumed in her presidential run (arguably out of necessity), an effeminate performance could hurt Hillary Clinton’s careful gender negotiation in the historically masculine presidential limelight. On the other hand, it could only compliment and bolster Obama as an aspirant for a traditionally female role. With both her career credentials and a rhetorical emphasis on her wifely and motherly roles, Obama could draw support from diverse groups of American women (and conservative-leaning men) without fearing the double-standard that Hillary needed to avoid (i.e., being feminine enough, but not *too* feminine to demonstrate authority). In a sense, Hillary Clinton’s macho political performance allowed Michelle Obama to function as the only female candidate in the democratic primary race (even as she ran for a non-elected position) and no doubt helped her husband strengthen his support among women.

An examination of Obama’s speeches in front of different types of audiences reflects that she (and her speech writers) were immensely sensitive to the importance of playing up key aspects of her identity for certain types of voters. In order to gauge relative differences in Obama’s self presentation to specific groups, I looked at a set of four speeches she delivered to a Black women’s groupⁱ, a Black religious organizationⁱⁱⁱⁱ, a women’s group of Obama supporters^{iv}, and a national televised audience at the Democratic National Convention (DNC)^{vvi}. The speeches to the women’s group and at the DNC were delivered to majority White audiences^{vii}. In selecting these specific texts, I aimed to compare Obama’s negotiation of Blackness and gender in front of different raced and gendered audiences^{viii}. In other words, I chose these speeches because they could reflect the different ways that Obama represents herself based on how she perceives the listening audience. In researching Michelle Obama’s speeches, I found that while she spoke frequently in front of women’s groups and other majority White audiences, her speeches to majority Black audiences were much more rare (as were the recordings of these events).

There are two discourse studies frameworks that I employed in examining the texts of each of Obama's four speeches. First, I looked at Obama's speech as rhetoric – this approach primarily means that I will

examine how these symbols are put together to achieve identification between a source and a receiver. Identification produces an ideology, a coherent worldview that allows interpretation of events, justifies power, and guides action (Kelley, pp. xvii-xviii).

Thus, my use of Obama's speeches as rhetoric demonstrates how she attempts to identify with her listeners by appealing to a shared belief system with her "rhetorical persona³" and specific "argument⁴" (Gill & Whedbee 171). I also employed performance theory as a mode of analysis – specifically, I looked at how Obama "modif[ies] [her] presentation of self to fit the situation (Hecht, Collier, & Ribeau)⁵" in performing an "authentic" gender or racial identity. That is, I paid close attention to the presence and use of race^{ix} and gender language^x. In looking at Michelle Obama's speeches at particular moments on the campaign trail, I eschew any notions of representativeness in my sampling. Instead, I hope to capture what D. Soyini Madison describes as: "[an] ideology and experience, bringing to life and location her sense of "fit" with her world-as-experienced in the temporal moment of performance" (Madison). I expected, then, that Michelle would speak more openly about her professional accomplishments in front of an audience within which she most keenly 'fit' - Black women.

While speaking to Black women, Obama states that "I stand before you today as one of the products of your labor, your struggle and your sacrifice." She cites her experience on corporate boards, pays homage to Black female exemplars and mentors, discusses gender pay inequity, and claims that "society tells girls like me that we shouldn't reach too high or dream too big". She also uses more inclusive language in front of Black women than in front of audiences than all others, often using terms such as "we, ours, us" much more frequently, as when she says

Black women are struggling every day just to keep our collective heads above water and this is true regardless of our socioeconomic status. You figure out how you're going to support a family without a job that pays a living wage.

Most interestingly, Obama never mentions her children to this audience. Neither does she refer to Barack Obama as "my husband", nor herself as "his wife"⁶

Less than a year later at the 2008 Democratic National Convention, her traditionally female roles are central to her political identity. Obama introduces herself as a wife "who loves her

husband”, a daughter raised by her father, a sister protected by her brother, and a mother “whose girls are the center of my world”. Similarly, in speeches delivered to the (White) female audience and the Black audience, Obama highlights her devotion to her daughters and her husband and only once vaguely references the “wonderful education” that she and her brother received. In these speeches, Obama makes it clear that her primary occupation is motherhood:

I am the wife of this wonderful guy you know, I hope you remember this guy, Barack Obama. I am a sister, a daughter, a friend, a working mother, but many of you know that my most important role is that of a mom...

My girls are the, they are the light of my life, the center of my world, they are the why reason I breathe in and out in the morning, they are the first thing I think about when I wake up and the last thing I think about when I go to bed.

Gone is the executive experience and the challenging climb to the top. She refers to her husband’s law degree as “fancy stuff”. Her professional experience, while visible in her masterful speaking skills, confidence, and carriage in the podium, is somehow less relevant and significant than her experience as a “mom”.

In connecting to White women, Obama’s rhetoric implies that successful engagement between Black and White women may rely strongly upon equating gender with motherhood—that is, most of Obama’s language about the struggles of women in this speech centered upon the way their hardships would impact their children. For example, she says

Right now, in this country the vast majority of women earn 77 cents or so to every dollar that a man earns for the same work. See, and what happens when women are paid less? Who pays the price? Their children, their families. Hundreds of thousands of dollars lost over a lifetime of work because of this pay equity.

Surprisingly, Obama also mentioned her education less in front of this predominantly White women’s group than at the DNC. Her message suggests that a common connection among White women and Black women in the contemporary moment may remain within the scope of the private sphere, depending upon shared experiences as wives and caretakers.

In speaking to the Black mixed-gender audience, Obama’s appeal to the Black community seems to also be constructed around her identity as a loyal wife – frequently, her proclamations about her love of and marriage to Barack Obama received much applause from the listening audience. This may suggest that the couple serves as the model of “good” Black (heterosexual) relationships, and Obama’s support in the Black community seems rooted in the pride

surrounding an educated woman's seemingly willing submission to traditional family roles. Her performance, thus, centers upon notions of Black respectability and patriarchy.

There is also a striking distinction between her use of the referent "Black" when giving the speech to Black women versus the speech delivered to the Black Baptists a year later – whereas she had previously said Black 31 times in her speech to Black women, she only said it 1 time in front of the latter audience. Overall, Obama rarely used racial referents in the three other speeches, even among a primarily Black audience. While she's one of many successful "Black women" in 2007, she is no longer the explicitly racialized "girl from the South Side of Chicago" at the 2008 Democratic National Convention.

In His Own Words

Narratives about Michelle Obama served as an important component in her husband's speeches as well. As a self-identified Black man born in Hawaii, fathered by a Kenyan man, raised by his unmarried teenage White mother, and reared as a child in Indonesia, Barack Obama's uncharacteristic childhood and "illegitimate" origins endowed the aspiring presidential candidate with an exotic persona. Unsurprisingly, then, many details about President Obama's childhood were omitted from his speeches and Michelle Obama's background frequently filled their void in his biographical tales^{xi}.

In substituting for Barack Obama's childhood, the story of Michelle Obama's family created an image to which most Americans might aspire, if not relate. Barack Obama's common mention of Michelle in his public remarks focused on her parents' class background, depicting Michelle as a product of a conventional couple with both middle-class and working class appeal. In Barack's telling, Michelle's father, Fraser Robinson, was the family breadwinner and a "city worker". Her mother, Marian, was a housewife who "manage[ed] a busy household filled with love, laughter, and important life lessons". Here is one such example, taken from a speech in January 2008 that follows his general rhetorical use of Michelle Obama during the campaign:

Michelle grew up in a working-class family on the South Side during the 1960s. Her father had been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis at just thirty years old. And yet, every day of his life, even when he had to rely on a walker to get him there, Fraser Robinson went to work at the local water filtration plant while his wife stayed home with the children. And on that single salary, he was able to send Michelle and her brother to Princeton.

Other versions of this story refer to the Robinsons as "blue collar" instead of "working-class", and include a line that reminds the audience that Michelle's family lived in a time when America "didn't just reward wealth, but the work and the workers who created it"^{xii}. At times, Michelle's speech narrative also begins with her upbringing in the predominantly African-American "South Side of Chicago"^{xiii} where she "attended Chicago public schools". With her father's financial

contribution and mother's full-time nurturing, Michelle graduated from competitive Ivy League schools and launched a profitable career as a corporate lawyer. Ultimately, she chose to abandon corporate success in order to "give back to the city she loves" and "help others serve their communities" through work at City Hall and Americorps. With little variance, these details made up the presidential campaign tale of Michelle Obama and were often cited in both of the Obamas' stump speeches and biography^{xiv}.

Yet, Michelle Obama's story did much more than just provide Barack Obama with a rhetorical and familial connection to the American working and middle class -- the example of the Robinson family subtly communicated to the audience that Barack Obama views the Robinsons' traditional male-headed household as a nostalgic ideal. With careful wordplay, the telling of the Robinsons' story within Michelle Obama's biography transforms her into her mother, mapping her housewife-centered childhood home onto her adult household by emphasizing her role as wife and mother (and neglecting her work in other spheres). The campaign website proclaimed that Michelle Obama is a woman who "doesn't hesitate" to "describe herself" as "first and foremost...Malia and Sasha's mom". In speeches and interviews, she justified her appearances on the campaign trail and travel away from her children by explaining that her mother was caring for Sasha and Malia at home in her stead. Her husband, on the other hand, rarely, if ever made such apologies for his work outside the home. These apologies (or lack thereof) communicate the gendered division of labor within the Obama household, in which Michelle Obama becomes the primary caregiver of their two children. Just like that, the Obamas become the Robinsons in the eyes of the American public -- a hardworking father and a wife committed to taking care of their children at home. Thus, the couple's campaign narratives re-inscribed White America's traditional notions of the patriarchal nuclear family. They also neglect to discuss the way that Michelle Obama's experience is extremely similar to the historical realities of other working Black mothers (including Michelle) who have "remained tied to overwhelming wage-earning and child-rearing responsibilities" (Jones, 5). As Jaqueline Jones explains in her study of Black working women in the United States, even "Black middle-class women have worked for pay outside of their homes to a much greater extent than their White counterparts" (Jones, 5).

As Michelle Obama's African American lineage made her racial identity legible, her normative upbringing provided easy fodder for constructing a narrative that epitomized the standard "American dream". By describing her family's urban roots, highlighting her parents' working and middle class attributes, and stressing her youthful accomplishments, and those of her brother, the Obama campaign transformed Michelle Obama into a shining symbol of struggle, success, family and racial uplift in American society. More than that, it so successfully blended Obama's biography into her husband's that it did not seem strange when she proudly proclaimed that "[Barack's] family was so much like [hers]..." during her speech at the Democratic National Convention.

A wider reading of Obama's interviews over the years reveal a woman troubled by the trappings of gender expectations and the limitations of the American dream. While Barack

Obama does refer to Michelle's ability to "juggl[e] jobs and parenting" with "skills and grace", he seldom (if ever) publicly notes that Michelle Obama's employment and salary made her the primary breadwinner of the Obama family. Rather than performing the passive role of doting wife and mother, Obama has often been critical of the gender dynamics in her nuclear family. In Barack Obama's autobiography, *The Audacity of Hope* he writes that she was often angry at his frequent work-related absences from their home, telling him "You only think of yourself... I never thought I'd have to raise a family alone" (p. 401). In one interview, Michelle said that "What I notice about men, all men, is that their order is me, my family, God is in there somewhere, but me is first....And for women, me is fourth, and that's not healthy" (Bennetts). Ultimately, Obama says she realized

We just cope. We're taught that as women: Just handle it. Just adjust. We accommodate things that aren't healthy instead of turning around and going, 'This has got to change' (Brooks).

While aware of this constraining gender framework, Obama seems unable to avoid its impact on her own career, especially as her husband's career advanced. In May 2007, a few months after Barack Obama officially became a presidential candidate, Michelle Obama decided to take leave from her job and devote her energy to being a fulltime wife, mother, and political surrogate.

The First Black Lady

Since the literature on Black women in politics focuses primarily on Black female politicians and activists⁷, looking at scholarship on political wives and Black women's performance in the public sphere helps elucidate the historical and social context through which Obama would steer as she campaigned to become the first Black First Lady. In speaking as an aspiring First Lady, Obama would have to take cues from the rhetoric of the presidential wives who had come before her.

Unlike their husbands' Constitutional mandates, the First Lady's position comes with no job description. Her duties and accomplishments are often tied to existing norms regarding womanhood, 'wifedom', and, most simply, what it truly entails to be a 'lady' in American society. When a potential First Lady is explicit about her refusal to conform to gender codes, the public's response can undermine her husband's political standing. One such example was the highly publicized media attack on Hillary Clinton after she remarked "I suppose I could have stayed home, baked cookies and had teas" during her husband's 1992 presidential campaign

⁷ See: Davis, Angela Y. *Women, Culture & Politics*. New York, NY: Random House, 1984; McClain, Paula D. "Comments on Roundtable on Blacks and Presidential Politics." American Political Science Association, Gender and Black Presidential Politics: From Chisholm to Moseley Braun Revisited, 1-5 Sept. 2004, Chicago, IL.; Walker, Robbie J., ed. *The Rhetoric of Struggle : Public Address by African-American Women*. New York: Garland Science, 1992; (Barrett, 1995)

(Kelley 155). Predecessors like Eleanor Roosevelt had learned to convey their progressive stance on women's work with flowery rhetoric, as when, in 1935, Eleanor Roosevelt defended her substantial involvement in the governance of the Roosevelt presidency when she explained that

... when people say a woman's place is in the home, I say, with enthusiasm, it certainly is, but if she cares about her home, that caring will take her far and wide (Parry-Giles & Blair 581).

By learning from the mistakes of an equally educated and accomplished First Lady like Hillary Clinton and the successful rhetorical maneuvering of a highly involved First Lady like Eleanor Roosevelt, Michelle Obama and the Obama campaign learned how to successfully portray First Lady Obama to the voting public.

On the campaign, she also committed herself to working on 'women's' issues such as Military Families and work/life balance if she became First Lady, likely as part of a continuing effort to establish herself as a heteronormative middle-class woman in the eyes of the public. She was not the first Black woman to use such rhetoric to establish her womanhood. Susan Mann (165) notes that much of Black women's activism centered upon working with children or advocating on behalf of Black men. It was work that both humanized them as Blacks while rendering them visible within the public sphere as women.

Yet, for Michelle Obama to become the "First Lady" in the minds of the American public would require, in some ways, a major effort to reimagine a space already defined and designed around constructions of White femininity. This implicit racial association is a fact generally unrecognized (or unmentioned) in the scholarly discussion of the First Lady roles and rhetoric^{xv}. Instead, Black femininity occupies the spaces and gaps that exist outside the strict gender norms required of the presidential spouse. So, on one hand, scholar Colleen Kelley can argue that

...Every First Lady has also served as a metaphor for her generation of women. Each has mirrored the status of American women of her time, symbolizing the "new" or "modern" woman of her era, while simultaneously shaping expectations of what future women might do and might become (p. xvii).

On the other hand, Kelley's claim ignores the fact that the "status of American women" has not historically been united, equal, or shared among all American females and that, largely, the referent "woman" in American culture has traditionally signified "White woman". For instance, while White women in the 19th century were organizing around their right to vote, Black women such as Sojourner Truth were arguing to be recognized as women in their own right.

Indeed nineteenth-century Black women were conceptualized by the dominant culture chiefly in bodily terms, in contrast to middle-class White women whose femininity, as defined by the cult of true womanhood, cohered around notions of the self-effacing body. According to this ideology, White women were to be hidden in the privacy of the

domestic sphere, where they were encouraged to develop purity of mind and soul, impose complete emotional restraint on their physical movements through stringent rules of etiquette, and veil their already pale and delicate bodies in clothes that, following the sentimental ideal of transparency, would translate inner purity into outward form. In contrast, the Black woman's body was always envisioned as public and exposed... feminine attributes and functions of the Black female body were thus commonly represented in degraded terms as abnormal excessive sexual activity. (Peterson 20).

The Black female/White female dichotomy remains a powerful one, resisting and cultivating stereotypes of White women as feminine, hidden in the domestic sphere, pure, pale, delicate, emotionally and physically restrained and Black women as public, exposed, hypersexual, abnormal, degraded, and bitchy. The divergent statuses of Black and White women produce a major chasm between the established spaces of White and Black femininities – a chasm Michelle Obama would have to bridge. As the role of the First Lady has been defined around domesticity, regality, and hostessing, it has silently organized First Lady identity in opposition and in contrast to the designation of Black women in American society. This places a complex paradox of resistance around the lived reality of a Black First Lady – in some ways, willingly occupying a patriarchal gender role as a First Lady can be both conformist and revolutionary for a Black woman.

The combination of race and gender made Obama particularly vulnerable to critiques that relied on traditional Black female stereotypes. In one instance, a Fox News producer referred to Michelle Obama as “Obama’s Baby Mama” in an on-screen graphic, employing a popular hip-hop term that often denotes the mother of a child born out of wedlock (Associated). In another example, New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd wrote that Michelle Obama was “emasculating” her husband when Obama mentioned in a stump speech that Barack had “stinky and snore-y” imperfections (Gibbs). Dowd’s criticism connected to the archetype of the Black Matriarch, which according to Patricia Hill Collins means “labeling Black women unfeminine and too strong [in order] to undercut U.S. Black women’s assertiveness.” The complex intersection of racism and sexism underlying all of these media reports was seldom discussed. Often the writings of Michelle Obama’s detractors cited her speeches as evidence of her ‘controversial nature’ (Dickerson).

Thus, Obama’s most consistent negative media portrayal relied on the Black female archetype of the Bitch. For Obama, racially charged terms like “angry” and “bitter” were often used to describe her “whining” about social injustice on the campaign trail. Stephanie Dunn writes

The construct of “the bitch” denotes a “difficult woman”...It can act as a “mask”, a role to be played that allows for the expression of a sort of “female resentment” that often comes out of disturbance, fear, anger, and rage. The moral badness associated with the icon of the

bitch suggests a woman who doesn't behave according to proper or traditional feminine mores (53)

As a Black woman, the radical female characteristics of Bitch are confounded by the race – a nonconformist Black Bitch is not just dismantling the nuclear familial organization of American society, she is also responsible for the distress of the Black family through her refusal of patriarchy. Consequently, the Black Bitch is culpable in the disproportionate failure of Black males and Black children, which contributes to racial disparities in areas such as health, employment, and education. While seemingly farfetched, such thinking can lead scholars like George Gilder to argue that “Black women bear substantial responsibility for the impoverishment of the Black community” (Davis, p. 209). Similarly, the notorious 1965 Moynihan report blamed Black matriarchs for the poverty of the Black family (Moynihan).

Discussion

Michelle Obama's position as a potential Black First Lady and as a political surrogate, but not politician, put her in what Victor Turner called “liminal space”. This state of liminality puts an individual “betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (Peterson, 17). This point is particularly relevant to Obama for, like her Black female predecessors in the public sphere, her traveling required the release of her job (yet lacked the insecurity) and removed her from ‘home’, “opening up new sites of empowerment” (18) as well as alienation.

While Michelle Obama's biography and political performance were generally assets in her husband's presidential campaign, the historical frames of Black women in the public sphere made it particularly challenging for her to occupy the role of First Lady as its been defined by traditional notions of White femininity. Her presence opened up a significant conversation about what it will mean for a successful Black career woman from a working-class family to become the (White) ‘Lady’ of the entire nation, yet most reporters disregarded the ongoing impact of her race and instead focused on simpler topics that make her much more readable, such as her gender, fashion sense, and career. Ultimately, Obama's performance on the political stage provides a deep insight into how a successful Black woman can and should appeal to the modern American eye.

What components of Obama's experiences are emphasized in her communication? What did Obama do to show she could be first lady in spite of the inherent trappings of White femininity? She embraced a performance of First Lady that adhered to traditional gender roles and eschewed the transgressive behavior of First Ladies like Hillary Clinton or Eleanor Roosevelt. In fact, she even refused the controversial title of “feminist” when asked by a reporter. “You know, I'm not that into labels... I wouldn't identify as feminist” she said, explaining that she would reject other political labels, as well. She downplayed her success in the professional arena and identified

herself as, “first and foremost” a “mom” during the campaign and perpetuated inequitable traditional domestic arrangements in her own marriage. I would also suggest that her Blackness allowed her to invoke a visually fashionable “chic-ness” as a First Lady ‘remix’, even in this midst of her concessions to a patriarchal tradition. Michelle Obama’s skin color called attention to the historical Whiteness of the First Lady role and, as such, allowed voters to embrace her as a way of denouncing their racism.

Perhaps what is most important about examining Michelle Obama’s speeches is what it reflected about her presentation of the most consumable image of a Black woman. Near the end of the campaign, it was clear that the most appropriate performance for a Black woman courting voters was one that occluded her professional experience outside of the home, even as her campaigning functioned as its very embodiment. If this analysis provides any good indicator of successful rhetoric for Black women in the public sphere, I would argue several things. First, Black women are most palatable to various publics when claiming traditional and patriarchal family structures. Black First Ladies must eschew overtly critical analysis or complaints and, instead, express themselves through the tropes historically aligned with White femininity – purity, frailty, and happiness in the private sphere. Though it seems that First Lady Obama has learned to cloak her critiques (i.e. disparity in public schools dietary nutrition) within uncontroversial campaigns (i.e. “Childhood Obesity”), scholars will continue to debate how much she adheres to (and expands) the confining strictures of her role.

The lesson of Michelle Obama, of course, does not end there. Through her heavy campaign involvement and activity, she also provides a good lesson for any up-and-coming politician looking for a partner. Unlike some previous political wives who have stayed out of the limelight and away from the podium, Michelle Obama successfully gained the public’s support on behalf of her husband. It is perhaps this skill that makes her such a fascinating subject of study. Having a surrogate who can speak for you, while even more carefully speaking for herself, will be an asset few politicians will be able to do without.

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Endnotes

ⁱ Delivered on September 30, 2007 to the National Congress of Black Women (NCBW) in Washington DC. The texts was retrieved from the Obama website.

ⁱⁱ Delivered on September 10, 2008 to the African-American National Baptist Convention in Cincinnati, OH (the group describes itself as “the nation’s oldest and largest African American religious convention). From <http://www.nationalbaptist.com/Index.cfm?FuseAction=Page&PageID=1000008> – retrieved on 11/20/2008.

ⁱⁱⁱ It should be noted that the Black audience was convened at a National Baptist Convention. I understand that religious alliances undoubtedly affected the selection of this venue and its textual content. D. Soyini Madison’s (1998) deep analysis of the Black gospel tradition within Black women’s orality lends complexity and nuance to my decision to identify Michelle’s Black Baptist audience as a representative Black broad audience for the sake of cross-cultural speech analysis. For Madison, the Black gospel tradition is a distinct communal experience that lends itself to certain philosophical and existential commitments that yield both liberation and oppression, and “cannot be adequately examined by theories based on political economy that do not consider the feeling-sensing ambivalence of daily living (p. 328).” Unfortunately, identifying a non-religious Black audience for Michelle has proven difficult – in my research, any self-identifying Black group to which Michelle delivered a speech was either a women’s group or a church organization.

^{iv} Delivered on September 18, 2008 to “North Carolina Women for Obama” in Greensboro, North Carolina. The text was transcribed from the C-SPAN online.

^v Delivered on August 25, 2008 at the Democratic National Convention in Denver, Colorado. Text was retrieved from the Obama campaign website.

^{vi} With the exception of Michelle’s speech to women of color, all of Michelle’s speeches highlighted in this paper were given within a month of each other. This distinction is particularly important for several reasons. First, the major differences in Michelle’s rhetoric from September 2007 to August/September 2008 may reflect on both her experiences in cultivating herself developed over the year, the difference in proximity to the election, and/or the differences in audiences. On the other hand, any major changes between the other three speeches delivered within the same month are much less likely to be affected by time.

^{vii} I determined the target audience of each speech by either the racial and gender self-identification of the group sponsoring the event where Obama presented or the title of the event. I also based it upon a phenotypic surveillance of the attendees at each event. When possible, I verified the transcript by crosschecking it with the video delivery of the speech. I obtained video recordings of all the speeches except the one delivered to the Black female audience, the National Congress of Black Women event in September 2007.

^{viii} While Michelle increased self-disclosure regarding her professional accomplishments in front of Black women, I must also concede that the time difference between that speech was so significant that, perhaps, the variance is more a reflection of incessant campaigning than Michelle’s own choices about audience and message. The significant differences in references to race between the Black female and broad Black audiences strongly suggest that time may have played more of a factor than audience. However, both invitations to speak in front of Black audiences were private events that Michelle attended. The broader audiences were reached through campaign funded and initiated media events – the nature of these venues and platforms may also contribute to the perceived privacy and relatability that Michelle communicated on stage. Much still remains to be examined in this area Perhaps as the First Lady’s record become more easily accessible, her ventures and presentations to the Black community will be easier to study.

^{ix} In examining race, I looked closely at Michelle’s use of explicit race words. Words in Obama’s speech that perform a race function was identified as any of the following terms – “Black”, “Blacks”, “African-American”, “African descent”, “of color”, “minority”/“minorities”, “race”, “racism”, “racist”, “racial”.

^x In examining gender, I examined her use words that perform a feminizing or gender function, such as – “mom”, “girl”, “girls”, “mother”, “daughter”, “sister”, “wife”, “aunt”, “niece”, “grandmother”, “women”, “woman”, “gender”. This measure will include the aggregate sum of each occurrence in which an item from this category appears in a speech.

^{xi} See: Remarks given by Barack Obama in Indianapolis, Indiana on 5/03/08, Raleigh, North Carolina on 5/06/08, Raleigh, North Carolina on 6/9/08, Dayton Ohio, 9/9/08, El Dorado, Kansas on 1/29/08,

^{xii} Raleigh, North Carolina on 5/06/08

^{xiii} Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: Discussion with Working Women, Albuquerque, NM | June 23, 2008

^{xiv} See <http://www.barackobama.com/speeches/index.php> For Barack and Michelle Obama speeches

^{xv} The presence of Michelle Obama on the national stage has, of course, noticeably changed the scholarly dialogue around the implicit association of Whiteness within the First Lady Role. One example of these recent writings that discuss this topic is: Williams, Verna L., The First (Black) Lady (June 1, 2009). Denver University Law Review, Vol. 86, p. 833, 2009; U of Cincinnati Public Law Research Paper No. 09-05