

WHO'S AFRAID OF MICHELLE: FORCING THE FEMININE STYLE TO RECAST
OBAMA'S IDENTITY DURING THE 2008 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

By

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ABSTRACT

In 2008 Michelle Obama faced a crisis of identity in the midst of her husband's campaign to become the president of the United States. We know from polling data that Michelle Obama effectively managed that crisis, successfully reformulated her identity, and is presently one of the most popular and respected women in the country. Obama's identity crisis was a problem that was resolved with rhetoric. This dissertation is a rhetorical analysis of the Obama campaign's strategies to recast Michelle Obama's identity—to diffuse stereotypes, rumors and innuendo by focusing predominantly on her role as a happy housewife and mother. The analysis in this project is split into two sections. The first section of analysis focuses on the Obama campaign's initial effort to rehabilitate Obama's identity via two high profile media appearances in June 2008. The second section of analysis examines Obama's address to the Democratic National Convention on August 25, 2008. Analysis of Obama's convention speech utilizes Dow and Tonn's (1993) political feminine style to show how Obama delivered a message containing conflicting political ideologies. Obama used a feminine style to continue her conservative makeover while simultaneously projecting a progressive vision of the American Dream. Even though Michelle Obama's identity was rehabilitated successfully, the analysis indicates Americans continue to be uncomfortable with strong, independent Black women in positions of power. Additionally, this case study reveals a disturbing trend regarding the use of the feminine style. Whereas typically it is a discursive form women use to gain access and influence, in this case it was forced upon Michelle Obama to usher her away from power.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: The Critical Problem and the Need to Recast Michelle Obama’s Identity During the 2008 Presidential Election.....	1
Review of Literature.....	3
Methodology.....	14
Preview of Chapters.....	18
Conclusion.....	20
Chapter 2: The Feminine Style and First Ladyship.....	22
Feminine and Masculine Styles of Communication.....	22
First Ladyship: Public and Private Women.....	30
Chapter 3: Identity Crisis and the Obama Campaign’s Initial Response.....	38
The Nameless, the Faceless: Black Women and the Presidency.....	39
Who’s Afraid of Michelle Obama: The Origin of an Identity Crisis.....	42
Softer, Happier: The New Michelle.....	51
Setback: The Politics of Fear and <i>The New Yorker</i>	60
Conclusion.....	63
Chapter 4: Mrs. Obama Goes to Denver: Using the Political Feminine Style to Rehabilitate Her Identity and the American Dream.....	65
The Secular Myth of the American Dream.....	68
Ronald Reagan and the Conservative Trajectory of the American Dream.....	70
Barack Obama’s American Dream: Reclaiming Progressive Values.....	72
Michelle Obama’s 2008 DNC Address: Political Feminine Style and the American Dream.....	76
Using Personal Experience to Support Claims.....	78
Politicization of the Personal.....	82
A Feminine Ethic of Care.....	84
Response.....	87
Chapter 5: Conclusion.....	92
Dissertation Findings.....	92
Limitations and Future Research.....	99
Bibliography.....	102

CHAPTER ONE

THE CRITICAL PROBLEM AND THE NEED TO RECAST MICHELLE OBAMA'S IDENTITY DURING THE 2008 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Barack Obama's chances of winning the election seemed like a long shot at the time he announced his candidacy in early 2007. At the time of his announcement, Obama was polling at a distant third place behind John Edwards and the all-too-certain nominee, Hillary Clinton (Wolfe, 2009). After a couple weak debate performances over the summer and a few campaign snafus (including Obama's choice not to wear an American flag pin), the candidate's chances of overtaking Clinton seemed unlikely—let alone his chances of winning the presidency (Plouffe, 2009). In his bestselling account of the 2008 presidential race, Obama's campaign manager, David Plouffe, recalls his frustration as he watched one of the many Democratic primary debates. He states:

Moderators George Stephanopoulos and Charlie Gibson spent the entire first half of the debate pummeling him. Sidestepping substantive issues, they led a cook's tour of all-out campaign controversies: Wright. Bitter. Flag Pin. They even introduced Bill Ayers, a former domestic terrorist and acquaintance of Obama's who would later assume a starring role in the campaign. (Plouffe, 2009, p. 219)

Additionally, a chorus of journalists and political commentators questioned—and invariably raised doubts—whether Americans were ready to elect a Black president. That doubt was raised in the weeks immediately following the announcement of his candidacy when polls showed Black Democratic voters favored Hillary Clinton by forty points (Tapper, 2007). This was an indication to many that a core constituency crucial to Obama's chances in the primary and general election doubted whether he could win.

These early difficulties would soon be resolved and Senator Obama gradually mustered the demands of a presidential campaign. Commentators judged his campaign as among the most skillful in recent memory. However, of all the barriers candidate Obama faced during the 2008 campaign cycle, one in particular requires close examination due to her proximity to the then senator and the evolution of her public identity. During an election cycle as fascinating and as newsworthy as that of 2008, little remains as confounding and as remarkable as the management of Michelle Obama's public identity preceding the presidential election. Four years removed from her husband's presidential campaign, one might look back and view Michelle Obama's public identity paradoxically. In 2012, the Obama campaign repeatedly proclaimed her to be its most important asset (Obama aides nicknamed her "The Closer"), yet Michelle Obama's public identity during the summer of 2008 presented the Obama campaign with what might best be described as a crisis (Gibbs, 2008).

Compared to her husband, Michelle Obama experienced a rough early transition into national presidential politics. For a period during the 2008 presidential primary campaign, Michelle Obama was seen as being "too outspoken" and "not as domesticated" as what should be expected of a potential First Lady (Powell & Kantor, 2008, p. A1). She vocalized her uneasiness about a run for the presidency, discussed the strains that high profile political campaigns placed upon her marriage and her family, and was often quick to criticize her husband (Dowd, 2008). She received the most significant amount of negative media attention when, discussing the grassroots political activism her husband's campaign was inspiring, she claimed that "for the first time in my adult life I am proud of my country" (Tapper, 2008). Reaction to this statement was quite harsh, with many comments containing strong racial overtones (Oinounou & Kopp, 2008). According to her political foes, Michelle Obama was seen as being critical of her country and expressing a lack of patriotism (Podhoretz, 2008).

While Michelle Obama faced immense criticism during the 2008 presidential campaign, she became increasingly popular during her husband's first term in office. At the time she began to campaign for her husband's reelection in May of 2012, the First Lady's approval rating was 66 percent—far exceeding Barack Obama's 52 percent (Camia, 2012). GOP strategist, Matt Mackowiak, was asked about Michelle Obama's character becoming a campaign issue in 2012 just as it was in 2008. He stated plainly that “Michelle Obama's untouchable at this point, politically” (Siegelbaum, 2012). This is a remarkable turnaround from one election to the next. To go from experiencing a highly publicized identity crisis in 2008 to being politically untouchable in 2012 suggests that Michelle Obama has effectively rebranded herself in order to be seen as voter-friendly at the outset of the 2012 presidential election.

How did this transformation happen? When did it happen? What were the crucial moments of Michelle Obama's public identity reformation? Why was her attempt at rebranding so effective? These questions have not received a full investigation from a critical perspective. There are discussions and documentation in the literature on Michelle Obama that speak to her navigation away from the criticism she faced in 2008. What is missing is an examination of Obama's public address and the role her own discourse played in reshaping her identity by rearticulating core American values. The goal of this project is to fill that gap in the scholarship, to arrive at a better understanding of Obama's transformation and explore its implications for future First Ladies.

Review of Literature

The literature on Michelle Obama has grown rapidly throughout the first four years of Barack Obama's presidency. However, only a small amount of writing and critical attention has been aimed at studying Michelle Obama's discourse—specifically during the 2008 presidential campaign. As one might expect, the most abundant type of writing on Michelle Obama to date is

biographical material. In addition to her personal history, Obama's agenda as First Lady (specifically childhood obesity, healthy eating, and exercise), as well as the media's attention to her body (specifically her arms) account for most of what the public knows about Michelle Obama (Armentrout, 2011; Grier, 2010; Moore, 2009; Raskin, 2011; Stolberg, 2010).

Several biographies have been written on the life of Michelle Obama—some works focusing more on her life before meeting her husband and other works that devote more attention to her life since becoming a wife, mother, and First Lady of the United States (Colbert, 2008; Kantor 2012; Lightfoot, 2008; Mundy, 2008). All of the biographical materials on Michelle Obama indicate a handful of crucial events, careers, and accomplishments that have had a profound influence on her life's trajectory. Michelle LaVaughn Robinson was born on January 17, 1964 to Frasier and Marian (Shields) Robinson in Chicago, Illinois. Both the Robinson and the Shields families are descendents of American slaves, specifically the Gullah people from South Carolina where some of the Robinson family live today (Mundy, 2008). Liza Mundy's (2008) well-researched account of Obama's early life describes in abundant detail the hard working culture of the Robinson family, the high expectations her parents set for her, and the influence growing up on Chicago's South Side had on her. She states in the book:

The day she was born, Michelle Robinson embodied the unique combination of discrimination and opportunity, hardship and overcoming, of being acted upon and acting, that would define much of black history in America. Of history in America, period. (Mundy, 2008, p. 13)

Both of the Robinson children (Michelle and her brother Craig) skipped the second grade (Lightfoot, 2008). Obama's work ethic and intelligence gave her the opportunity to attend elite secondary schools and, like her brother before her, to attend Princeton University (Colbert, 2008). Mundy (2008) describes a sense of predestined attainment that befit Obama as she gained

access to institutions that had only recently begun to accept black women from working class families. She writes:

Rather than being explicitly shut out or regularly and unapologetically discriminated against, during her lifetime Michelle Obama was granted admission to privileged quarters that only recently had become open and that were still uneasy about her presence or, at best, unprepared. One way to understand Michelle Obama is as a person who has lived much of her life on contested terrain. (Mundy, 2008, p. 20)

Obama majored in sociology, minored in African American Studies and graduated cum laude with a Bachelor of Arts in 1985 (Kantor, 2012). She received a law degree from Harvard Law School in 1988 and then became an associate at the Chicago office of the law firm Sidley Austin where she met her future husband (West, 2004).

Although we may know her best as a mother of two who has focused mainly on exercise and healthy eating as First Lady, Obama had an impressive professional career before moving into the White House. She worked in city government as an assistant to the Mayor of Chicago in 1991 and two years later served as Executive Director for the Chicago office of Public Allies, a non-profit organization encouraging young people to work on social issues in nonprofit groups and government agencies (Newton-Small, 2008). In 1996 she accepted a position as the Associate Dean of Student Services at the University of Chicago where she developed the university's Community Service Center (Obama named, 1996). In 2002 she began working as the executive director for community affairs for the University of Chicago Hospitals and then in 2005 as the Vice President for Community and External Affairs (Michelle Obama appointed, 2005). She served as a salaried board member of TreeHouse Foods Inc., a major food supplier to

Wal-Mart. She left that position in 2007 immediately after her husband made comments critical of Wal-Mart and the company's trade union availability (Sweet, 2007).

In her role as First Lady Michelle Obama has become an effective advocate for healthy eating and exercise (specifically childhood obesity), issues related to poverty and caring for the families of military servicemen and women. Arguably, Obama has been most visible in her goal to affect change with regard to the epidemic of childhood obesity in the twenty-first century. Obama has made it clear that she hopes that progress on this issue will serve as her legacy. She told the *New York Times* in 2010 that "I want to leave something behind that we can say, 'Because of this time that this person spent here, this thing has changed.' And my hope is that that's going to be in the area of childhood obesity" (Stolberg, 2010). In addition, Obama has spearheaded a national movement called "Let's Move!" which has a goal of "solving the challenge of childhood obesity within a generation so that children born today will reach adulthood at a healthy weight" (Sosbe, 2010). When the program was launched by the First Lady in February 2010, she described how the campaign would work to encourage healthier food in schools, clearer food labeling, and more physical activity among children (Grier, 2010). The "Let's Move!" campaign is closely related to Michelle Obama's initiatives on healthy eating and gardening. Obama has received widespread publicity on healthy eating by planting a White House garden—the first vegetable garden on the property cultivated by a First Lady since Eleanor Roosevelt (Gourley, 2011; Stolberg, 2010). In May of 2012 Obama published *American Grown: The Story of the White House Kitchen, Garden, and Gardens Across America* which documents the White House garden through the four seasons, provides recipes for healthy eating, and tells stories of community gardens throughout the United States.

Michelle Obama leads by example. She plants and harvests the White House garden. Her own workout regimen—including a personal trainer, daily workouts at 5:30am, and her iPod

playlist—has been reported in numerous fitness magazines (Moore, 2009; Raskin 2011). Obama has discussed the ways that she instills healthy eating habits in her own family. With regard to the Obama daughters (Sasha and Malia), Michelle Obama explained, “I’m the mom, so I monitor—I am with the kids every single meal. But Dad is no slouch either” (Singh, 2009, p. 1). Obama has also revealed herself to be someone who struggles with the same types of diet and health issues as many average Americans. In an interview with *Women’s Health* magazine she discusses the temptations of less healthy foods and how she is able to continue to eat them:

I do love a good burger and fries. French fries are my favorite food in the whole world. If I could, I’d eat them at every meal - but I can’t. My whole thing is moderation. If I make good, healthy choices most of the time, then having what I love every once in a while won’t hurt. I have to exercise and eat in a balanced way. If I start ignoring both, I will put on weight (Moore, 2009, p. 68).

Later in the same article, Obama goes on to admit that her toned figure does not come naturally. “I am fortunate in that I’m 5’ 11” so it takes a while for the weight to be seen, but it’ll come. If I didn’t exercise and eat right I would be heavier, and I have been” (Moore, 2009, p.68). Writers have noted that part of the First Lady’s ethos as the spokeswoman for the “Let’s Move!” campaign has been openness regarding her own struggle with weight and the difficulties she faces as a mom raising two healthy children (Armentrout, 2011).

Michelle Obama’s body—and specifically her arms—receive a considerable amount of attention from many corners of the media world. In her official portrait that hangs in the White House Obama is wearing a sleeveless dress which is a common style of dress often worn by the First Lady. In the past there has been an interesting tension in the media when journalists and commentators discuss Obama’s style choices. The wave of critique that met Michelle Obama early in her tenure as First Lady for her style choices is well documented (Clark-Flory, 2009;

Ibanga, 2009; “Up in arms,” 2009). She went sleeveless on *60 Minutes*, at an evening for the National Governors Association, during her husband’s first address to Congress, and on the cover of *People and Vogue* in addition to her official White House photo. Among the most common complaints was the suggestion that Obama’s choice of dress was inappropriate for a First Lady and flaunted her sexuality. At the same time many were expressing outrage over Obama’s revealing style of dress, scores of news articles and magazine cover stories appeared that expressed fascination and envy of Obama’s body—specifically her arms (Givhan, 2009; Jones, 2009; Kantor, 2009; Marson, 2009; Park, 2009; Schmich, 2009; Yadegaran, 2009). Rylan Duggan, a personal trainer interviewed by CNN, said that after the First Lady appeared sleeveless during a joint session of Congress his clients who once asked for “Madonna arms” and “Kelly Ripa arms” began to ask for “Michelle Obama arms” (Park, 2009). An article written in *The Chicago Tribune* looked at “our buff-arm fetish” in response to the fascination surrounding Obama’s sleeveless formalwear (Schmich, 2009). Over time, Obama’s arms have become less divisive yet they remain symbolic of her objectives as First Lady. When the President rolls up his sleeves his handlers are signaling to the American public that he is ready to get to work on whatever tasks lie ahead. Similarly, choosing a sleeveless dress for her official White House portrait may be a sign that Obama sees her role as more than ceremonial. A sleeveless Michelle Obama sends message of strength—an ethos that will spearhead the agenda of healthy eating and exercise.

All of the attention directed at the First Lady’s agenda on healthy eating and exercise—as well as her own appearance and style—is indicative of how influential Michelle Obama has become on the proper role and appearance of contemporary women. A Washington Post-ABC News poll released in early 2012 suggests that many Americans credit the First Lady for several key things: 84% of respondents see her as a good mom, 91% see her as intelligent, and 60% of

Americans say that the First Lady shares their values (11% higher than the president on the question of shared values) (Cohen, 2012). That such a large number of Americans view Michelle Obama favorably and believe that she shares their values is remarkable—especially when one reflects upon her transition to national politics in 2008.

Obama's favorability ratings are significant, but perhaps more profound has been her influence on the way women think about themselves. Shortly after the Obamas moved into the White House, an anthology was published which compiled letters written by African American women to Michelle Obama titled *Go Tell Michelle: African American Women Write to the New First Lady* (Seals Nevergold & Brooks-Bertram (Eds.), 2009). The anthology is a collection of a hundred letters and poems from Black women in America who collectively celebrate a historical political/cultural achievement and who continue to reflect upon the discrimination and rejection that women of color face in America. Many of the letters discuss the unprecedented moment in American history and a remarkable opportunity for African American women to look at the White House and see and speak to one of their own there. Like the correspondent below, many of the letter writers describe the ways in which they see themselves in Michelle Obama:

You are me. When I look at you, I see me. I see the young African American woman who, through good family values, strong roots, hard work, and perseverance, has come into her own ... Though your journey may not be easy in the coming days, weeks, months, or years, think of us to ease your burden and pain. Think of those who you inspire. Think of those who you have given hope to. Think of those whom you have filled with pride. Think of your sister ... Think of your favorite cousin. Think of your mother. Think of me. We are the same. (Seals Nevergold & Brooks-Bertram (Eds.) 2009, p. 123)

Similarly, another letter addresses the pride that the author feels and the hope that Obama will serve as inspiration to Black women now and in the future:

Thank you for your courage to say yes, to step from behind your private veil into the public eye, to step forward with the grace of boldness, to carry a message that 'Hope is a wise decision' and also teaching the importance of learning to prepare oneself because with hope, things can change. I sat next to my daughter, praying that all women would tell this message to themselves, their daughters and sisters, nieces and neighbors, mothers, grandmothers, aunts, friends and sisterfriends, strangers and mates. But most of all, I thank you from the bottom of my heart to remind me to keep being hopeful so I can keep flapping my wings and not be afraid to fly.

Again, the theme of Obama acting as a mirror for Black women to see themselves saturates the anthology:

We are one woman, blessed to be born Black in America...I rejoice for every little girl, every teenager, young adult and yes even every senior, who like me, can look at you and see herself. I rejoice for the mothers who loved their children as much as you and I do, yet could not protect them. (Seals Nevergold & Brooks-Bertram (Eds.) 2009, p. 11)

The anthology is a resounding expression of love, adulation, and inspiration for the new First Lady. For many of the contributors to this anthology it is very important to them that Michelle Obama is recognizably black (i.e. "dark-skinned"), from the South side of Chicago, and who identifies with being Black in America. Collectively, the letters are a statement of the way that the writers' self-perceptions have changed. Through many of the letters, the women authors seem to be saying that the world might see them in a new way because of Michelle Obama.

Most of the literature on Michelle Obama focuses on her history, her agenda, and her body. The description of this material makes quite clear the significance of studying Michelle Obama. Her transformation from “scary” in the 2008 campaign to beloved today clearly is both politically important and revealing. What the literature cited to this point does not do is focus on her rhetoric.

There are a few publications that have focused on Michelle Obama’s discourse, and most of these materials appear in the form of collections of Obama’s speeches, interviews, and quotations, during the 2008 presidential campaign (Obama, Office of the First Lady, & Jones, 2010; Obama & Rogak, 2009; Obama & Vander Pol, 2009; Sellers Publishing, 2009). There are also accounts of the 2008 presidential campaign that revisit those instances when Michelle Obama’s public comments became the source of public and media backlash—comments which forced the Obama campaign into a mode of damage control (Heilemann & Halperin, 2010; Plouffe, 2009; Wolffe, 2009).

Additionally, there was a significant amount of commentary surrounding Michelle Obama’s major public addresses, appearances and interviews in the run up to the presidential election in 2008. Naturally, Michelle Obama’s convention speech in Denver on August 25th received widespread media coverage and was discussed nearly as much as her husband’s in the days following the address. Seen as an effective address, many discussed Obama’s success at shifting her public image away from an “angry black radical” toward a patriotic, loving mother and wife (McWhorter, 2008; Simon, 2008). In a less formal but no less important setting, Michelle Obama’s appearance as a co-host of ABC’s *The View* was seen as one of her first opportunities to rebrand her damaged image (Powell & Kantor, 2008). Most mainstream media commentators reacting to Obama’s appearance on *The View* noted her “softer side” and her “playfulness” as co-host (Fuller, 2008; Parker, 2008). Obama was seen to be successful at

beginning to diffuse the controversy that preceded this particular appearance (Stanley, 2008). Obama's appearance as co-host on *The View* was a major portion of her rebranding roll-out so that the American electorate would start to see her primarily as a wife and mother. A chorus of commentators on the left—specifically feminists—were unhappy with Obama's choice to avoid a more substantive discussion of racism and attacks from the political right. Obama's decision to rebrand herself appeared to cower from political attacks and retrench longstanding racial fears of black women (Bond, 2008; Cox, 2008; Sanders, 2008).

While these accounts contain little detailed rhetorical analysis of Michelle Obama's discourse, all of the material outlined above—from biography to collections of speeches to political and popular commentary—is critical source data for investigating Obama's identity transformation in 2008. This literature along with a broader collection of materials which focus on the unique discursive constraints that confront First Ladies provide a necessary background to begin an investigation into Michelle Obama's identity transformation in 2008.

In addition to press reports and commentary on Michelle Obama's role in the 2008 campaign and as First Lady, the literature on First Ladies and their discourse is extensive. The second chapter of this project will explore this literature to a greater extent with close attention to the unique gender constraints that First Ladies face in their political role and in pursuit of a political agenda. In this space it is important to recognize that some of the existing scholarship is useful for thinking about the unique constraints that First Ladies face. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell (1996) speaks of “the impossible role” most modern First Ladies have faced as they navigate the difficult relationship between women, sexuality and power (p. 181). Campbell (1996) cites Eleanor Roosevelt and Hillary Clinton as the two First Ladies who have generated the greatest amount of public controversy precisely because these two women did not meet “the demand that presidential wives fit a traditional mold and represent idealized U.S. womanhood” (pp. 189-90).

Other authors continue to echo this finding that these women face a difficult public performance—one that makes the pursuit of an individual political agenda extremely difficult due to deeply entrenched historical expectations for what it means to be an ideal woman (Anderson, 2004; Mayo & Meringolo, 1995; Simonton, 1996; Weckin, 2000). Much like Campbell's (1996) analysis, Eleanor Roosevelt and Hillary Clinton typically are identified as the two women who most directly challenged traditional gender expectations for First Ladies. This scholarship is an important foundation to begin an exploration of the current First Lady, yet Michelle Obama has faced unique constraints in her role as the wife of the forty-fourth President. Again, the second chapter is a detailed discussion of the difficult gender constraints that all First Ladies encounter as well as a focused examination on the unique set of circumstances Michelle Obama faced as her husband began campaigning for the office of President of the United States—constraints she continues to negotiate as First Lady.

The literature on First Ladies points to the importance of studying Michelle Obama's rhetoric. Much of the literature provides useful background for the analysis of that rhetoric. There is evidence in the literature that all First Ladies have faced a difficult balancing act between public and private identities. For the most recent First Ladies, finding the balance between the public's expectations for a "true woman" while pursuing a public agenda is undoubtedly difficult—especially under the microscope of the twenty-four hour media cycle. The tension between public/ private and traditional/modern almost always is negotiated with public address. Thus, the existing literature on First Ladies contains useful background and analysis to uncover what experiences Michelle Obama shares with the First Ladies before her and what it is that makes her experience unique.

Methodology

The volume cited earlier in which Black women wrote of the importance of Michelle Obama, while not itself a work of rhetorical analysis, provides an important hint about the most useful way to explain Michelle Obama's rhetorical practice. That volume and much additional commentary makes it clear that the identity constructed by the then senator's wife and now first lady has played an influential role in shaping audience response. Thus, my starting point for developing an appropriate means of analyzing the discourse of Michelle Obama will be the idea of identity construction.

The identity of any person is constructed and reconstructed through communication. As a consequence a person's identity is always in flux—constantly being maintained, adjusted, and serviced with a myriad of communicative strategies. The constant maintenance and malleability of one's identity is normal as one engages in any form of communication. Stuart Hall (1993) argues that there are two kinds of identity, identity as being (which offers a sense of unity and commonality) and identity as becoming (or a process of identification, which shows the discontinuity in our identity formation). Hall (1993) states, "We cannot speak for very long, with any exactness, about 'one experience, one identity,' without acknowledging its other side—the ruptures and discontinuities which constitute, precisely, [its] uniqueness" (p. 394). For Hall, identities are not eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous "play" of history, culture and power. Further, identities are the names we give the different ways "we are positioned by" and "position ourselves within" the narratives of the past (p. 394). Therefore, the disconnect between the way we position ourselves and the way we are positioned by cultural forces—especially narrative—is a basic function of the way identity is formed.

The disconnect or "play between" the two components of identity is a crucial point of critical focus because it is the place of identity's articulation. Gramsci described this articulation

as “the starting point of critical elaboration”—it is the consciousness of what one really is, and in “knowing thyself” as a product of the historical process to date which has “deposited an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory” (Forgacs 2000, p. 19). Identity marks the conjuncture of our past with the social, cultural and economic relations we live within. Gramsci argues that “each individual is the synthesis not only of existing relations but of the history of these relations. [S]he is a précis of the past” (Forgacs 2000, p. 20). Articulation of identity avoids all forms of fixity and essentialism; social, political and class affiliations do not exist *a priori*, they are a product of articulation. Articulation captures our desire to stake out some cultural affiliations and to avoid others—and articulation also reflects the way that cultural affiliations act upon us and reshape our identities.

Public identities—or identities on display for mass consumption by large audiences—often operate under different circumstances than identities performed in one’s personal life. Often, public identities are orchestrated by an apparatus of people working together with a specific strategy and set of goals. This is true for presidents and first ladies who employ staffs of people skilled in navigating a complex media environment at the beginning of the twenty-first century. For example, Michelle Obama has a team of two dozen advisers and staff members headed by communications director Camille Johnston and press secretary Katie McCormick Lelyveld who assist her on decisions ranging from what to wear, where to appear, and what to say.

Perhaps the most interesting public identities to examine are those that have been in crisis. In the context of examining the identity crisis of a public figure, “crisis” means that there is a rupture between the way that an identity is being crafted for an audience and that audience’s expectation for how that identity should be communicated. In order for a public figure to retain credibility among a particular audience (or the public in general), her identity requires

reconstruction and redeployment in order to continue fulfilling its social and rhetorical functions. There is no question that Michelle Obama went through such a crisis in 2008. The reconstruction of public identity almost always happens immediately following the inception of crisis. This time period offers an unmatched window through which to view this communicative phenomenon.

Existing literature on the event suggests that, faced with a crisis of identity, Michelle Obama and her handlers quickly adopted a more traditional, feminine voice (or style) (Dowd, 2008; Stanley, 2008; Ulysse, 2009). Feminine voice has been a controversial topic in communication scholarship. Whether or not gender differences exist in a particular communicative situation is often contested. Yet, in the realm of political rhetoric, distinctions between a traditional feminine/domestic sphere of influence and the masculine public sphere are far more pronounced (Campbell 1989). According to Campbell (1989), “feminine style” reflects an emphasis on concrete data, personal tone, personal experience, inductive structure, and audience participation. Given the centrality of identity construction to responses generated by Michelle Obama and the consensus that norms related to the feminine style have been imposed on female political leaders, it is important to flesh out the principles of a feminine rhetorical style in political contexts and examine the way that adoption of a feminine style can be used to combat identity crisis for a public figure.

Additionally, Obama had to carefully reconstruct what it meant to be patriotic and to project a more traditional image of that particular value. Finally, I will give close attention to Obama’s understanding of the American Dream and the way her articulation of that particular concept evolved over the course of the summer of 2008. There is wide agreement that the Obama campaign focused on the American Dream (Balz & Johnson, 2009; Clayton, 2010; Wolffe, 2009). Given this consensus, it seems sensible to consider whether Michelle Obama

reinforced, redefined or rejected the larger campaign's vision of the revitalization of the American Dream.

Since one focus of this project is to examine identity transformation in times of crisis, the next step is to carefully analyze crucial moments following the perception that Michelle Obama faced a crisis of identity during the 2008 presidential election. In this particular case, Obama's initial attempt at rebranding herself began with two high profile media events: the cover and feature story in *US Weekly* magazine as well as a co-hosting appearance on ABC's *The View* (Fuller, 2008; Parker, 2008; Powell & Kantor, 2008). A case will be made to stress the importance of these texts and to justify their examination in order to illuminate the origins of Obama's identity transformation. Additionally, I will analyze her speech to the Democratic National Convention later in the summer to explore the evolution of her reformulated identity and her articulation of values.

To this point, I have identified crucial theoretical materials that will inform the study, and the key moments of crisis that I will study. Linking these two ideas together will be inductive considerations of how each text's thematic elements are used in order to uncover the strategies employed by Michelle Obama (and the Obama team) to rebrand and relaunch her public identity. For each of the texts examined in this study, special attention is aimed at understanding Obama's use of the feminine style, her role in the campaign, how she imagined herself as First Lady of the United States, and how her rhetoric produced a vision of the American Dream.

At the same time that the existing literature makes it clear that the concepts cited previously played an influential role in her rhetorical successes and failures, it is important to test that judgment through a careful analysis of her discourse. Therefore, in relation to each work of rhetoric, I will begin with an inductive thematic, stylistic, argumentative, and strategic analysis, designed to both identify the key elements in each speech or interview, consider those elements

in relation to the rhetorical situation in question, and consider how (and whether) identity construction, the feminine style, and the American Dream were made manifest in the particular case. In following this approach, I utilize a method similar to that of Bonnie Dow and Mari Tonn (1993) who investigated the unique rhetorical situation faced by Ann Richards, former governor of Texas, and the rhetoric she produced in response to that situation. The authors explored the way that Richards employed the feminine style to contrast with her opponent and more effectively articulated values that appealed to a broader electorate. Jane Blankenship and Deborah C. Robson (1995) applied a similar method to investigate the way the feminine style gains legitimacy by being used by men and women in power. The authors analyzed the use of feminine style by President Bill Clinton and Senator Dianne Feinstein.

In the final stage of this project's methodology, I will develop a description of the underlying principles defining Michelle Obama's rhetorical practice and tie that description to the rhetorical situation Obama faced and relevant public opinion data. One key goal is to explain how Michelle Obama transformed her public image from that of angry radical to the most loved person in the nation.

Preview of Chapters

Chapter 2: The Feminine Style and First Ladyship

This chapter begins with a discussion—and contrast—of the feminine and masculine styles in political communication. The chapter includes an overview of the nature of gender construction among First Ladies of the United States, and will focus on recent changes in role construction; special attention is aimed at uncovering the unique barriers these women have faced as rhetorical actors in support of their husbands' presidencies as well as in pursuit of their own agendas. More attention is given to the First Ladies occupying the White House in recent history.

Chapter 3: Identity Crisis and the Obama Campaign's Initial Response

This chapter is a historical overview of Michelle Obama's difficult navigation through the primary and general election seasons in 2008. Focusing mainly on the media backlash to Obama's impromptu "proud of my country for the first time" comment and an unfortunate *New Yorker* magazine cover, this chapter explores the way that Obama was branded as an unpatriotic angry black woman and the way that those stereotypes crescendoed in the media and saturated American political discourse. Chapter 3 looks at the ways the angry black woman stereotype became the filter through which the American public understood Michelle Obama. From being raised on the South side of Chicago, her undergraduate thesis at Princeton, and a congratulatory fist bump with her husband—the angry black woman stereotype framed Obama in a way so that her childhood, her intellect, and her demeanor made many fearful of her proximity to the White House.

This chapter also examines the way that Michelle Obama's public persona was rebranded in order to appear more palatable to those who might potentially vote for her husband. This chapter begins with a justification for the texts selected to study the process of Obama's rebranding. This chapter provides a rationale for studying Obama's initial discourse following the perception of identity crisis to best understand the communicative phenomenon employed to rebrand Obama. Following a justification for the selected texts and a rationale for the approach, this chapter inductively considers the thematic elements of Michelle Obama's interview with *Us Weekly* magazine, and appearance as co-host of ABC's *The View* in June of 2008. Close attention is given to her articulation and performance of femininity, her role as wife and mother, and what she understands her role to be in the campaign.

Chapter 4: Mrs. Obama Goes to Denver: Using the Political Feminine Style to Rehabilitate Her Identity and the American Dream

This chapter argues for the importance of studying Michelle Obama's public address—in this case a crucial moment in her husband's campaign and a singular moment in the evolution of a Michelle Obama transformed. Her speech to the Democratic National Convention on August 25, 2008 came at the end of a tumultuous summer, and it stands as a culmination of her attempt and an attempt by the Obama campaign to rebrand the eventual First Lady as patriotic American with a mainstream vision of the American Dream. In this chapter, careful consideration is given to the unique set of rhetorical barriers Obama faced as she planned for this address. Inductive considerations of thematic elements are used to uncover the strategies Obama deployed to deliver an effective speech.

Chapter : Michelle Obama, the Master's Tools and the Master's House

This chapter will review the major findings of this project and draw conclusions about the effectiveness (and costs) of Michelle Obama's identity transformation during the 2008 presidential campaign. At the conclusion of this project I examine the changing nature of the feminine style and the way it has been forced upon women to escort them away from power. Also, I discuss the ways that, in Michelle Obama's case, the forces of racism were combated with a softer, more traditional approach to occupying the role of First Lady. Finally, I consider limitations of this study and offer directions for future research.

Conclusion

Without question, Michelle Obama faced a crisis of identity in the midst of her husband's campaign to become the president of the United States. We know from polling data that

Michelle Obama effectively managed that crisis, successfully reformulated her identity, and is presently one of the most popular and respected women in the country. The rebranding of Michelle Obama deserves attention from communication scholars because it appears to have been a problem that was resolved with rhetoric.

CHAPTER TWO

THE FEMININE STYLE AND FIRST LADYSHIP

First ladies negotiate a difficult balance between public and private worlds. These are worlds of contradiction. The tension between patriarchy and public influence place first ladies a difficult and unique rhetorical situation that can make them iconic figures in American politics. The difficult contradictions first ladies face as public actors and advocates present them with an opportunity to develop public discourse that is both feminine (and consistent with traditional expectations for women) as well as persuasive and a site of tremendous influence. This chapter reviews the literature from the scholars who have outlined the form and function of a feminine style of public address and its major distinctions from the traditional, masculine style. Additionally, this chapter provides an overview of the evolving roles of first ladyship. Included in this section of the chapter is a discussion of the various kinds of roles that first ladies have played in the past (and continue to fulfill), how the roles have evolved in the modern era of American politics, and the direction historians and scholars see the role of first lady evolving into the future.

Feminine and Masculine Styles of Communication

For over a quarter of a century, scholars of public address have recognized the existence and importance of a feminine style of speech. As greater numbers of women gained access to the public sphere—specifically elected office—and affirmed their roles in public and political circles, the need for critical attention to the unique rhetorical strategies employed by women was essential. During the first decade of the twenty-first century, the contributions of women as political actors have received more attention than ever before. Hillary Clinton, Madeline Albright, Sarah Palin, and Michelle Obama are all important examples of women in recent years who successfully maneuvered within the confines of the masculine world of national politics.

Each of these women has received individual attention regarding the way that she adopted a feminine voice in difficult rhetorical situations in order to accomplish discursive and political goals. The goal of this chapter is to review the literature on the use of the feminine style, identify similarities and differences to a more traditional masculine style of public address, and review the use of a feminine voice in several recent situations to illustrate its effectiveness in challenging political contexts.

The argument of this chapter is not to assert that men and women innately speak in fundamentally different ways. Researchers have argued that difference in speech styles between men and women reflect murky categories to begin with and are the outgrowth of the traditional spheres that men and women occupied in Western culture for centuries (Campbell, 1973, 1989, 1998; Dow & Tonn, 1993). Historians have documented extensively the ways that women customarily occupied roles in the domestic sphere while men were public and political actors (Welter, 1966). The case has been made by many that stylistic differences appear, not because of biology, but because of longstanding cultural power differentials “which serve to legitimate and to privilege certain forms of discourse traditionally reserved for men” (Felski, 1989, p. 62). Traditionally, men have dominated the public sphere, relegated women to domestic life and responsibilities, and have limited their ability to participate in public address. However, over the last century women gradually penetrated the public sphere. Women slowly and painstakingly made inroads to speaking in public and political situations, and as they did so developed a feminine rhetorical style. Women found success gaining adherence with a feminine style which utilized the uniqueness of women’s private lives in the domestic realm.

Five dominant features are usually cited as hallmarks of the feminine style. The use of inductive reasoning, concrete examples, a reliance on personal experience, a personal tone, and the solicitation of audience participation characterize the feminine style. Public address scholars

study the way that speakers have adapted and amended the feminine style over time, yet the core feature of this rhetorical posture have been identified again and again (Campbell, 1973, 1989, 1998; Dow & Tonn, 1993; Gilligan, 1982; Perkins, 1989; Sutton, 1992).

Karlyn Kohrs Campbell has been a pioneer in the scholarship about the feminine style. Most of her work has focused on individual, effective orators within the feminist movement specifically for the period in which female participation was quite limited (Campbell, 1973; Campbell, 1989). A byproduct of scholars identifying the presence of a feminine style is the explicit acknowledgement that in the past effective rhetoric was based on masculine standards. “Good rhetoric” could only be masculine from a masculine perspective. Women were viewed as inherently deficient in delivering effective public address and therefore omitted from its scholarship because they lacked masculine attributes (Kramarae, 1981; Spitzack & Carter, 1987).

The good speaker has been gendered as masculine (Campbell, 1998). In the masculine style, speakers are expected to assume an aggressive posture, to refute and debate those opposed to their ideas, and to utilize logic to construct a case (Campbell, 1986). Historically, female speakers are viewed as modest, unsuited for debate, emotional, and submissive. During the mid-to-late nineteenth century, the rare woman permitted to speak to a mixed audience (an audience of men and women) was viewed as risking the introduction of irrationality and sexuality into public deliberation (Zaeske, 1995). The historical exclusion of Western women from engaging in public address and deliberation means that present day genres of speech have been coded as masculine. A woman living during the early-to-mid twentieth century was hard pressed to identify historical precedents to guide her as she sought to be heard by her community. Masculine models of discourse were all that existed (Campbell, 1998).

It remains critical for rhetorical scholars to continue to examine and evaluate the public address of women (and men) who utilize a feminine voice. Campbell (1973, 1989), one of the

original theorists who began the study of a feminine style, recognized the existence of a distinct communicative style mainly deployed by women and which was different from the style of its masculine counterpart. Campbell (1973) began her investigation of a feminine style by studying the rhetoric of second wave feminists, and since that time her work has been extended by numerous scholars. Gilligan (1982) explored gender differences in communication by identifying an “ethic of care” that is an outgrowth of the nurturing role women are socialized to adopt as mothers and caretakers. Sutton (1992) argued that women are associated with the body, nature and the domestic sphere while men have been linked to intellect, culture, and public life. In order to fully understand the unique stylistic differences that exist between genders, the differences in the life experiences of men and women must be taken seriously.

A variety of studies have investigated Betty Friedan’s (1963) *The Feminine Mystique*. The work marked an important transition point in the scholarship of masculine and feminine styles. Perkins (1989) underscored Friedan’s apparent use of feminine characteristics such as personal experience, emotional appeals, and narrative. Additionally, Perkins (1989) identified Friedan’s use of masculine rhetorical styles like logical appeals, deductive reasoning, cost-benefit analysis, and a focus on problem-solving techniques. Perkins (1989) pointed to Friedan’s impulse to employ the traditionally masculine power of “naming” when she identifies the “problem with no name” as “the feminine mystique.” Perkins (1989) saw Friedan’s use of both the feminine and masculine styles as intentional to appeal to a wider audience.

Bonnie Dow and Mari Tonn (1993) build on the work of Campbell (1989) in one of the more notable applications of the feminine style. Dow and Tonn (1993) identify three elements of a feminine style utilized by Ann Richards, the former Governor of Texas. In their research the authors submit that the characteristics of the feminine style apply to other rhetors. First, Dow and Tonn (1989) identify the use of personal experience to support arguments as a feature of the

feminine style. Personal examples, anecdotal reasoning, and a personal tone—characterized by self-disclosure and generating identification with an audience—are different from a deductive masculine style. Rhetors using the feminine style use personal experience as women historically have shared personal experiences to build relationships (Jones, 1980). Dow and Tonn (1993) argue that personal experience is used to pursue political objectives. Speakers utilizing the feminine style make the personal political. Typically women pull from their personal experience in the home as mothers and care-providers in seeking political rights and protections to help them carry out domestic responsibilities. Finally, the authors argue that rhetors evoke a feminine ethic of care via the feminine style. A feminine ethic of care pulls from the characteristics of women as mothers, wives, and nurturers in their families. Speakers pursue political objectives that are consistent with values that are expected of virtuous women.

The features of the feminine style offered a new lens for studying public rhetoric. Scholars were no longer constrained to judge all rhetoric by standards defined and based on the masculine style when studying female speakers. A new perspective for studying a feminine style cultivated an appreciation for the public address of women whose communication previously would have been considered inferior to that based in a masculine style. As more women continue to infiltrate the realm of politics and elected office, scholars can use the feminine style as a useful framework for studying their rhetoric and its effectiveness.

The features of the feminine voice developed by Campbell (1973, 1989) and extended by Dow and Tonn (1993) have been used by rhetorical scholars throughout the discipline and are now an accepted paradigm for studying public address (Amaro, 2000; Blankenship & Robson, 1995; Hayden, 1997; Johnson, 2005; Kimble, 2004; Mattingly, 2002; Tonn, 1996; Zurakowski, 1994). According to Blankenship and Robson (1995), “feminine style is gaining legitimacy through its use by women and men in power” (p. 353). In their essay, Blankenship and Robson

(1995) examine Bill Clinton and Dianne Feinstein's use of the feminine style and apply Dow and Tonn's (1993) framework in their analysis. Blankenship and Robson's (1995) essay is important also because it explores the use of the feminine style by a man—and not just any man—the President of the United States. Their argument is reminiscent of more recent explorations of Barack Obama's use of feminine style-type appeals during his first term in order to achieve broader appeal and pursue a pro-women agenda (Esposito & Finley, 2012; Milbank, 2012).

While the feminine style has been applied usefully for two decades, it is important at this point to recognize that there are strong disagreements about the extent to which there are real differences between a masculine and feminine style of communication. Almost everyone will remember the immediate popularity of John Gray's (1992) polarizing book, *Men are From Mars, Women are From Venus* which offered arguments about the fundamentally different communication strategies of men and women in interpersonal relationships. Gray's (1992) book ignited a popular debate about the existence of differing communication styles that reflected a debate that was happening in scholarly communities. Small group and interpersonal scholars have recognized gendered differences in communication styles based upon a number of factors. For example, those who use a masculine style typically are permitted to speak in interpersonal and small group situations for longer periods of time (Alexopoulou & Driver, 1997; Eakins & Eakins, 1976; Hyde & Deal; 2003; Reis, Senchak, & Solomon, 1985). Social scientists have shown that men use more verbalized pauses and interruptions than a woman (Baird, 1976; Colarelli, et. al., 2006; Hall, 1984; West & Zimmerman, 1983), while women ask more questions (Deal, 2000; Smythe & Huddleston, 1992). These are just a few examples of the social scientific research that has reported on the differences in communication styles between men and women. However, there are scholars and studies that contest these types of findings and argue that there

are no significant differences between the communication styles of men and women (Dindia, 1987; Kennedy & Camden, 1993; Mulac, et al., 1998; Smythe & Schlueter, 1996).

Like their social scientific counterparts, there are rhetorical scholars who question whether the feminine style retains its power for present-day speakers—or whether the feminine style ever held any unique form of discursive power. Daughton (1994) suggests that nearly every speaker looking to achieve adherence in the public sphere will reject the feminine style on the basis of its inferiority—or reject its existence altogether. Daughton (1994) focuses specifically on the “nonfeminist” female speaker and argues that this person will look to conform hastily to the masculine standards of public address and rhetorical norms. It is typical for the nonfeminist female to argue that her identity as a woman is irrelevant (Daughton, 1994). The most sinister strategy of the nonfeminist female speaker is to suggest that the views and arguments of speakers who adopt a feminine style are inherently weak and their objectives not worthwhile.

Karlyn Kohrs Campbell (1998) lays out the limitations of the feminine style in her essay “The Discursive Performance of Femininity: Hating Hillary.” One of the author’s arguments in this essay is that a speaker’s reputation and past rhetoric may make it difficult for a feminine style to be a viable option for a rhetor in the public sphere. Campbell (1998) examines closely the trajectory of Hillary Clinton’s first ladyship. At the outset of the Clinton presidency, Hillary Clinton was a co-president and spearheaded the administration’s healthcare reform initiatives. Those initiatives were met with tremendous resistance from the political right and corporate interests in the private sector. There is ample evidence to suggest that Hillary Clinton’s leadership on the issue contributed to the administration’s failure to make any progress and reach consensus on the issue. Campbell (1998) argues that it is Clinton’s inability to adopt the feminine style as the administration’s spokesperson for healthcare that results in her failure to make progress. Campbell (1998) identifies the ways in which the Clinton administration

attempted to change the first lady's public identity—everything from changing her style of dress (from pantsuits to skirts) and the role she played in the administration (from co-president to happy housewife of the White House). Going forward, Clinton was a less visible, less effective public advocate. Even as she adopted a feminine style in her public address post-healthcare it had little impact in restoring her role as a persuasive public advocate (Campbell, 1998).

Over the last four years a handful of political commentators have identified Barack Obama's use of a feminine style as a sign of weak political leadership. Parker (2010) argues that President Obama is suffering from the inverse of Hillary Clinton's hyper-masculine rhetorical style during her pursuit of healthcare reform in the 1990s. Parker (2010) argues that Obama has not met cultural expectations of commanding leadership, and while men have adopted the feminine style effectively in the past, Obama's "passive-voice constructions" during the BP oil spill made for ineffective rhetoric during that crisis and has altered his perceived leadership capabilities over the course of his first term. Dana Milbank (2012) conflates Obama's pandering to women throughout his reelection campaign with use of the feminine style. The argument is that adopting a feminine style to pander to women for reelection cheapens women's issues and lessens their importance among other political struggles.

It has become increasingly common for male rhetors to employ components of a feminine political style and they have an advantage over their female counterparts. Men have a greater amount of rhetorical flexibility to shift from a masculine style to the feminine political style and pull from the advantages of both paradigms. That men typically garner praise for using the feminine style by appearing inclusive and sensitive further reflects the double standard women face as they trespass into masculine rhetorical territory and incur criticism.

While the existence of a double standard is not news, it may be news to suggest that it may offer women political and rhetorical advantages. The feminine style has gained greater

acceptance and with it, women's style of argumentation permeates the public sphere and our collective consciousness. In their analysis of the public sphere, Dow and Tonn (1993) emphasize the potential for the feminine style to reshape the public sphere. The authors suggest that a different way of reasoning has the potential to change ideology and institutions that are supported and perpetuated by patriarchy. Dow and Tonn (1993) argue for the transformative power of the feminine style. In this way, I think that the feminine style is especially well suited to analyze the rhetoric of Michelle Obama as she sought to transform her own public identity when it was in crisis. Obama's use of the feminine style—and specifically the way she married it to the value of the American dream—demonstrates its power to transform not only political institutions but individual identities.

First Ladyship—Public and Private Women

As recently as the year 2000, scholars have argued that “the study of first ladies is a new field” (Eketerowicz & Paynter, 2000, p. 548). While there have been historians who have catalogued the lives of these women since the time of Martha Washington, more recently political scientists, psychologists, and sociologists have taken an interest in this emerging field (Eketerowicz & Paynter, 2000). With a growing body of literature examining the rhetoric of first ladies, communication scholars increasingly have sought to focus more attention on the lives, language, and media coverage of the president's spouse. This review of literature will explore the way that the role of the first lady has evolved. Particular attention will be aimed at rhetorical analyses of the discourse of first ladies and the way that rhetoric is used to manage the tension between her public and private roles.

With few exceptions, first ladies are partners in marriage, and thus, they are partners in their husband's presidency (Watson, 2000). Watson (2000) offers a typology for studying first ladies based upon their involvement in the partnership of their husband's presidency in which

each wife is assigned to one of five categories. Watson (2000) recognizes Full Partners (Eleanor Roosevelt and Hillary Clinton) as women very active in politics and their husband's administration. These are women who spearhead legislation, take on campaign and social responsibilities, and serve as other top advisor. The Full Partner is "active and influential both publicly and privately" (Watson, 2000, p. 140). The Partial Partner's primary responsibility is fulfilling the social and presentational role of the president's wife. While she may work in support of a project or two, she assists the president minimally in his public duties. Lady Bird Johnson and Betty Ford are examples of the Partial Partner. Jackie Kennedy and Nancy Reagan fulfilled the role of the Behind-the-Scenes Partner—a role which is "personal and private" (Watson, 2000, p. 141). The extent of the influence of the Behind-the-Scenes partner is difficult to discern because she is private and rarely visible in public. The Partner-in-Marriage (Mamie Eisenhower and Pat Nixon) is a "traditional" wife—she plays hostess of the White House and is not involved in her husband's administration in any way. Finally, the Nonpartner is the least active type of first lady as she shows little interest in the role whatsoever. Watson (2000) identifies Letitia Tyler and Jane Pierce as the only women deserving of this designation.

Other historians offer different types of categorization for the roles that first ladies occupy. Whereas Watson's (2000) typology does not offer overlap (each first lady is designated as one type of partner), other types of categorization are more flexible. Gutin (2000) organizes first ladies around their communication styles and identifies three main types of first ladies. Those first ladies who assist the president by hosting parties and organizing the White House's social calendar utilize a Social Hostess/Ceremonial Presence communication style (Gutin, 2000). These first ladies choose not to pursue a public agenda and instead exert private influence over their husbands if at all. The first ladies who transform(ed) the role from private to public and from ceremonial to one of advocacy are Emerging Spokeswomen (Gutin, 2000). This

communication style is characterized by “political professionalism” and an influential role of “consequence” (p. 568). The most influential and active communication style for a first lady on Gutin’s (2000) scale is the Independent Activist and Political Surrogate. These women are full-fledged political and rhetorical actors “using all available means of persuasion” to influence politicians, businesspeople, and American public opinion (p. 569).

While the role of the first lady has evolved over time, Watson (2000) argues that core duties and responsibilities largely have remained the same for the president’s wife. Her primary responsibility has been and most likely always will be as a wife and mother. Even though Watson’s (2000) typology includes a range of public roles that a president’s wife may occupy including “Diplomat” and Social Advocate,” the author maintains that being a good, attentive mother and nurturing her family is crucial to her public identity and “is often overlooked by those who study first ladies” (p. 73).

Historians and biographers alike have noted the difficult position first ladies find themselves occupying. There exists a difficult double standard in terms of gender differences—namely, being a good husband is not a function of the office of president. Thus, there is a tricky balance any first lady must maintain with the electorate in that the requisite amount of effort and energy must be directed at domestic responsibilities before she can pursue a public agenda. Wekin (2000) suggests that first ladies lack a “blueprint for first ladyship” and as such, each woman must determine her own path based on public expectation and public attitudes (p. 602). Wekin (2000) offers six types of first ladies ranging from the least active and political to the most engaged in public and political responsibilities (the conscript, the shield, the courtesan, the consigliere, the regent, and the co-president). The author suggests that there is overlap among the various types of roles that a first lady may inhabit during her husband’s presidency. Over time, first ladies have modeled their time spent in the White House based upon the lessons and

successes of the women to come before them (Wekkin, 2000, p. 609). The majority of first ladies that have desired to pursue a political agenda have found it most effective to work out of view of the American public.

First ladies have always faced a double bind from a public that disapproves of her public policy agenda, and simultaneously is suspicious of the power she wields in private to manipulate her husband. Because she typically is confined to a ceremonial role of hosting parties and decorating the White House, the public has had to speculate as to a first lady's influence with her husband. While there is a debate among historians about the extent of a first lady's "bedroom influence," her role as a lover and partner to her husband has been documented to be both a source of great influence with the president and a liability to a distrustful public (Eksterowicz & Paynter, 2000, p. 549). To offset the distrust the American public, most presidents have publicly acknowledged and thanked their wives for contributions made in private (O'Connor, et al., 1996). Increasingly, first ladies have begun to be more open about the role they play privately, yet complete disclosure about the extent of their private influence seems unlikely and politically unwise.

The key to understanding the power invested in first ladyship is the tension between her public and private roles. Historians maintain that private, advisory power is crucial to her influence and a source of suspicion amongst the American public. Ambitious, agenda-driven first ladies ignore domestic responsibilities and burden the first couple with negative publicity, yet public service has become expected of the president's spouse (O'Connor, et al., 1996).

The trajectory of the American public's interest in the first lady's popularity has changed over time. In fact, it is not until Hillary Clinton's co-presidential, policy-driven partnership that pollsters and scholars alike focused intently on the public opinion about the first lady (Cohen, 2000). Before Clinton, first ladies generally were popular—even those women who were

“outspoken” and visibly engaged in their husband’s administration (Burrell, 2000, p. 529).

Citing Eleanor Roosevelt’s popularity among the American public, Burrell (2000) argues that the sentiment typically remains favorable for a public first lady as long as her pursuits are successful. In this sense, Burrell (2000) argues that Clinton’s favorability might not have suffered so markedly during her husband’s first term had health care reform legislation passed. Clinton’s policy failures and the resulting unpopularity she faced caused several commentators to forecast a bleak outlook on the ambition of future first ladies (Burrell, 2000; Cohen; 2000). While the trajectory of future first ladies is likely to include women who are more publicly ambitious, they are women who likely will have learned the lessons of Hillary Clinton and sought out roles and agendas that are independent of their husband’s policy goals.

The modern first lady also has had to contend with 24-hour cable news networks and a mediated image that together play a serious role in shaping the public’s perception of her. Common wisdom might suggest that overexposure in the national media spotlight would conflict with a first lady’s public popularity; however, a first lady will use the media to improve and repair her image. For example, the failure of the Clinton healthcare reform plan as well as the Whitewater scandal damaged Hillary Clinton’s reputation. Clinton and her staff enacted a media makeover where she traded in her pantsuits for skirts and spent most of her time as a tour guide and interior decorator for the White House (Burden & Mughan, 1999). Clinton moved from the center of the political arena as her husband’s co-president to a more docile and domestic public image “of a spouse whose overriding concern was now the welfare of children” (Burden & Mughan, 1999, p. 238). A first lady’s relationship with the media is complex. Often the media is a check on her ambition and requires her to be seen as a caregiver in a domestic role. Yet, the media often is the first lady’s best tool for repairing her image should she need to do so. Because

the first lady lacks an official office with official duties and the public never is sure as to the extent of her political influence, she is defined largely by the media.

Clinton's relationship with the media set a new template for first ladies. Clinton received significantly more media attention than the first ladies who immediately preceded her (Nancy Reagan and Barbara Bush) (Scharrer & Bissel, 2000). Furthermore, the Clinton administration was obsessed with knowing what the American public thought of her, and to that end, consistently commissioned polls to receive that data (Scharrer & Bissel, 2000). A combination of the media's obsession and the Clinton administration's constant drive to repair and bolster her popularity created a "simulated Hillary" where every aspect of her public image was created for public consumption (Parry-Giles, 2000).

Examining Hillary Clinton as a case-study demonstrates the limitations of an effective feminine rhetorical style. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell (1998) argues that Clinton was boxed into a schizophrenic public identity—as she became a strong advocate for policy reforms, the media and public demanded a softer, more feminine rhetorical approach. Campbell (1998) realizes "her limited ability to adapt to these expectations intensifies the efforts of opponents to punish her violations and, in effect, to compel her to retreat into more conventional displays of femininity" (p. 14). Essentially, forces both within the Clinton administration and those external to it successfully feminized Clinton and "she is confounded by the ill-defined character of an ambiguous role" (p. 15). Clinton's role as a public advocate diminish severely after her failed attempt to reform healthcare. In the end, Campbell (1998) admonishes us: Clinton is partly to blame for her failures to reconcile her various roles; however, the American public's inability to recognize the argumentative skills of an expert public advocate is our deficiency, not Clinton's.

Hillary Clinton came under fire for her purposeful and forceful entry into the public sphere of American politics. Her denial of roles traditionally fulfilled by first ladies (and later

her perceived contempt for being forced to occupy more traditional roles) makes her the antithesis of her successor, Laura Bush. Bush was a schoolteacher before becoming a mother, and as First Lady she naturally accepted the traditional roles as hostess of the White House and caregiver for her husband and children (Wildman, 2001). The juxtaposition of Clinton and Bush as first lady is an illustration of the “public/private divide which has been seen as an impediment to women’s access to equality in political affairs” (Edwards & Chen, 2000, p. 367). The cultural expectations that Americans have for their first lady have not changed significantly over the last one hundred years; however, culture and society has changed a great deal. In today’s world, it is common for women to have careers—high paying and high powered jobs which increasingly make women the breadwinners in their families. Yet, first ladies must remain focused on caring for their families. All efforts at engaging in public policy are secondary, and when she chooses an issue to champion it must be consistent with her role as nurturer and caregiver. It is unlikely that the American public will object to issues like literacy, childhood obesity, and healthy eating. And being objectionable is the greatest risk a first lady poses to the ambitions of her husband.

Conclusion

The review of literature in this chapter shows that the feminine style has been used by women (and occasionally men) who seek access and influence in the public sphere. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell has spearheaded the research on the feminine style and was the first to isolate its components and distinguish it from its masculine counterpart. As researchers turned their attention to the feminine style they developed a new framework for studying public address and cultivated an appreciation for examining the rhetoric of women. Campbell was the first researcher to recognize the power of the feminine style to transform the public sphere. The form has the power to offer audiences alternative ways of reasoning that may shift ideologies long entrenched in patriarchy. Dow and Tonn (1993) extended Campbell’s work by defining a

political feminine style which focuses on a rhetor's use personal experience, polarization of the personal, and a feminine ethic of care. Dow and Tonn (1993) extended the discussion as to the ways that the feminine style could change institutions and political debates, and their work is useful for thinking about the usefulness of the feminine style in changing a rhetor's identity.

The review of literature on first ladies lays a foundation for thinking about the uniquely difficult exigence Michelle Obama faced during the 2008 presidential campaign. In this chapter I provide an overview of the various ways that historians and researchers have catalogued and differentiated among the various roles that first ladies serve. There are a range of options when it comes to the type of first lady a president's spouse will be; however, the core responsibilities of a first lady largely have remained consistent over time. There is an expectation among Americans that the first lady will not neglect her duties as a wife and as a mother. Thus, first ladies simultaneously occupy a position with expectations for her to fulfill public and private obligations. Being first lady comes with a fair amount of power and influence, and in the modern era, first ladies are expected to pursue an agenda of their own. It is customary for a first lady's agenda to be consistent with her domestic responsibilities. More importantly, a first lady working to accomplish her own agenda must remember to fulfill her obligation of caring for her family.

CHAPTER THREE

IDENTITY CRISIS AND THE OBAMA CAMPAIGN'S INITIAL RESPONSE

During his 2008 presidential campaign, Barack Obama faced a wide range of obstacles and distractions that generated public doubt as to his viability as a candidate to be the nation's chief executive. In addition to being biracial, having a Kenyan father and a non-traditional middle name, in 2007 Barack Obama was largely unknown as a national political figure (Tapper, 2007). As the media and Obama's political opponents began to uncover his personal and political history, relationships emerged that quickly became fodder for those wishing to portray Obama as radical and unpatriotic. Jeremiah Wright, a black nationalist preacher whose church the Obamas attended for twenty years and William Ayers, a radical white leftist with ties to domestic terrorism, and Rashid Khalidi, an Arab-American scholar and harsh critic of Israel were three of the prominent skeletons in Obama's closet and each of these men joined the main cast of characters throughout the 2008 presidential campaign (McClelland, 2008). Throughout the campaign Obama negotiated the difficult terrain of distancing himself from the extremist views of these individuals without repudiating any of them (it is only after Wright suggested that United States invites terrorist attacks through its foreign policy and that the AIDS virus is a conspiracy to commit genocide against minorities that Obama divorces himself from his pastor) (Zeleny & Nagourney, 2008).

Looking back from the vantage point of history, an argument can be made that Obama's most serious obstacle to winning a presidential election was not his race, his unfamiliarity, or his association with Reverend Wright or Bill Ayers. Michelle Obama, the candidate's wife, experienced a difficult transition into the national political spotlight. For a significant period of time during 2008 her public identity faced tremendous scrutiny and backlash, and a serious effort was made by the Obama campaign to relaunch and rebrand her identity. This chapter is an

exploration of the constellation of events that badly damaged Michelle Obama's public identity and forced the Obama campaign to work to reimagine the future First Lady. This chapter begins with an examination a statement Michelle Obama delivered in February 2008 and the backlash she faced as a result. In July of that year a satirical cover of *The New Yorker* added fuel to problematic stereotypes that had been circulating throughout the media for most of 2008. This chapter also explores the Obama campaign's initial attempt to remedy Michelle Obama's identity crisis through various media appearances. While the initial media campaign effectively recast Michelle Obama as a mom-in-chief, I argue that those initial attempts were unsuccessful at derailing cultural attitudes and fears that continued to persist throughout the summer of 2008 up until the Democratic National Convention.

The Nameless, the Faceless: Black Women and the Presidency

Unearthing the origin of our cultural fear and fascination with Michelle Obama is difficult because these attitudes have existed in the United States since its inception and are rooted deeply into our national collective identity. On the rare occasions when a black woman has been a central figure in a president's life or a presidential campaign it is most often the case that she is the object of scorn rather than praise. Over the last decade historians have uncovered the full extent of the relationship between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings (Gordon-Reed, 2008; Lanier, 2002; Meacham, 2012). Jefferson's political opponents in 1802—hearing rumors of his scandalous affair with “this wench”—exposed his relationship with “a concubine” as evidence of his immorality and his inability to govern without distraction (Hyland Jr., 2009). In the 1970s Ronald Reagan began to use the “welfare queen” as a symbol of those who drained taxpayer money leeching off of government handouts (‘Welfare queen,’ 1976). Reagan never used a specific name, but on multiple occasions described this ne'er-do-well as having acquired “80 names, 30 addresses, and 12 Social Security cards” and “collecting welfare under each of her

names” (‘Welfare queen’ 1976). In a notable coincidence, Reagan’s welfare queen was reported to live on Chicago’s South Side—the same location where Michelle Obama (Robinson) was raised. The image of the welfare queen resonated powerfully among Reagan’s political base as he ran for governor of California and later President of the United States.

The hypothetical character worked so well as a source of anger that similar references and allusions continue to be used in national political campaigns. As recently as 2012, several Republican primary candidates for president made reference to the perils of dependency in a welfare state. During the primary Newt Gingrich attracted the most attention for his language. He called Obama a food-stamp president, questioned poor children’s work ethic, and said poor people should want paychecks, not handouts (Budowsky, 2012). While campaigning in Iowa, Rick Santorum said, “I don’t want to make black people’s lives better by giving them somebody else’s money” (Blake, 2012). He later said he didn’t mean to say black people, but meant people (Blake 2012). During the primary, Mitt Romney repeatedly said that Obama wants to transform America into an “entitlement society” (Brennan, 2012). In the final stretch of the general election campaign a video of Romney speaking at a private fundraiser surfaced in which he responded to a question about independent voters by arguing:

There are 47 percent of the people who will vote for the president no matter what. All right, there are 47 percent who are with him, who are dependent upon government, who believe that they are victims, who believe the government has a responsibility to care for them, who believe that they are entitled to health care, to food, to housing, to you-name-it. That’s an entitlement. And the government should give it to them. And they will vote for this president no matter what And so my job is not to worry about those people. I’ll never convince them they should take personal responsibility and care for their lives. (Corn, 2012)

Uncouth in 2012, Gingrich, Santorum and Romney did not refer directly to “welfare queens” as they ran for president. However, the stereotype continues to serve as a reference point for many when they are asked by politicians to imagine those who abuse governmental assistance. Kaaryn Gustafson, author of *Cheating Welfare: Public Assistance and the Criminalization of Poverty* (2012), is unconvinced that the welfare queen will be dethroned. She argues, “I’m hearing politicians say poor people need to learn how to work or that we need to drug test welfare recipients—it makes me think that even if people aren’t directly invoking the Welfare Queen stereotype, they are indirectly. The ghost of the Welfare Queen is still lurking” (Blake, 2012).

When Bill Clinton was running for president for the first time in 1992, he publicly condemned Jesse Jackson for allowing hip hop artist and author Sister Souljah to be a part of his Rainbow Coalition (Shepard, 1992). Sister Souljah’s statements about the 1992 Los Angeles riots (“If black people kill black people every day, why not have a week and kill white people?”) were widely publicized and criticized by many in the media and politics (Rule 1992). Clinton’s response was harshly criticized by Jackson who claimed that Sister Souljah had been misquoted and who later said, “Sister Souljah represents the feelings and hopes of a whole generation of people” (Lewis, 1992). Understandably, many African American leaders had mixed emotions following Clinton’s response as they felt that they were being used by the candidate as proof to suburban whites that he could stand up to blacks (Lewis, 1992). Known as Clinton’s “Sister Souljah moment,” the event undeniably helped him win the presidency as it bolstered his credibility amongst independents and moderate Republicans.

On a few rare occasions black women have made presidential bids. Shirley Chisholm was a New York City congresswoman who ran for the Democratic nomination for president in 1972—and survived three assassination attempts in the process (Barron, 2005). Lenora Fulani

spent nearly three decades seeking an end to the two-party system and attempted to create a “viable, national, pro-socialist” party for those who feel ignored by the Democratic and Republican parties (Serrette, 1987). Fulani ran for the presidency in 1988 and 1992. In 1988 she won 0.2% of the popular vote—the highest number of votes for a female presidential candidate in a general election at that time (Fulani, 1993). In 1992 Carol Moseley-Braun became the first black woman elected to the United States Senate, and in 2004 she ran for the Democratic nomination for president (Mitchell, 2010). Repeatedly asked by journalists why she did not support another candidate who had a “real shot at victory” like John Edwards, Howard Dean, or Al Sharpton, in the end Moseley-Braun found it difficult to raise money and she was unable to collect enough signatures to get on the ballot in Virginia (D’Orio, 2009).

Yet, for every Chisholm, Fulani, and Moseley-Braun there have been scores of other nameless, faceless black women demonized for another’s political gain. At the outset of her life in the national political spotlight Michelle Obama became the latest victim in a long, sordid history of attempts to marginalize black women—to reduce them to stereotypes of jezebels, welfare mothers and militant radicals.

Who’s Afraid of Michelle Obama: The Origin of an Identity Crisis

On Monday, February 18th, 2008 Michelle Obama appeared at a campaign rally in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Speaking about the optimism and enthusiasm surrounding her husband’s presidential campaign she said, “For the first time in my adult lifetime I am really proud of my country. And not just because Barack has done well, but because I think people are hungry for change. And I have been desperate to see our country moving in that direction” (Tapper, 2008).

Obama’s comment caused a backlash among political talking heads and bloggers on the right. Conservative cable talk show hosts and right-wing talk radio personalities saw the gaffe as

a chance to call into question Obama's patriotism and the loyalty she felt toward her country. For many on the right, Obama's impolitic comment in Milwaukee confirmed suspicions that she resented whites and felt angry about ongoing racism in America. Michelle Obama's "proud of my country" comment served as a litmus test for how people felt about Obama the candidate. James Klumpp, a professor of political communication at the University of Maryland argued "For the Obama people, the explosion of comments [on the right] serves as a confirmation of the critique he is delivering, that this is just the old style of politics that needs to be changed. For those who oppose Obama, it is another kind of confirmation" (Stearns, 2008). Obama's comment breathed new life into fears of those on the right that Michelle and Barack Obama had anti-American attitudes. With one sentence, Michelle Obama had connected the dots between "proud of my country" and Reverend Jeremiah Wright and Bill Ayers.

Outrage to Obama's comment came in waves—some immediate and some delayed. In a column, conservative commentator Michelle Malkin said, "I can't keep track of the number of times I've been proud—really proud—of my country since I was born and privileged to live in it" (Malkin, 2008a). Rich Galen, also a conservative columnist, damned Obama by extensively quoting Lee Greenwood's "Proud to be an American" and noted that America is a place that "gives people like Michelle Obama the right to say excruciatingly stupid things" (Galen, 2008). Rush Limbaugh made the story a headline on his website for several days following Obama's comment and said "her unhinged comments ring true for many liberals" repeatedly on his radio program (Stearns, 2008). Most of the reaction from the extreme right aimed to paint the Obamas as out-of-touch liberals who have little in common with average, patriotic Americans.

After the initial wave of outrage from the extreme right, moderate Republican voices began to weigh in on what was becoming a significant news story. In an editorial for *Commentary*

magazine titled “She Said *What?*” John Podhoretz interrogated Michelle Obama’s statement with several questions:

Can it really be there has not been a moment during that time when she felt proud of her country? Forget matters like the victory in the Cold War; how about only things that have made liberals proud—all the accomplishments of inclusion? How about the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1991? Or Ruth Bader Ginsburg’s elevation to the Supreme Court? (Podhoretz, 2008)

Weekly Standard editor Bill Kristol said that Obama’s comment “was sort of revealing” and went on to suggest in a Fox News interview:

She was an adult when we won the Cold War without firing a shot. She was an adult for the last 25 years of economic progress, social progress. I think the Democrats have to be careful...they’re running against the status quo... You have to be careful not to let that slide into a kind of indictment of America. Because I don’t think the American people think on the whole that the last 25 years of American history is a narrative of despair and nothing to be proud of. (Oinounou & Kopp, 2008)

Michelle Obama’s would-be counterpart in the upcoming general election, Cindy McCain, delivered a not-so-subtle response to “proud of my country for the first time” in Brookfield, Wisconsin. McCain stated plainly during a campaign stop, “I’m proud of my country. I don’t know if you heard those words earlier but I’m very proud of my country” (Cooper, 2008). When asked later if she was responding directly to Michelle Obama, McCain skirted the confrontation and simply stated once again, “I just wanted to make the statement that I have and always will be proud of my country” (Cooper, 2008). Given the often bitter political climate during presidential campaigns along with the media’s insatiable appetite for even the slightest hint of drama, the

brief appearance of a First-Lady-to-be media showdown generated a significant amount of media attention and the event dominated cable news discussion for several days thereafter.

One of the most noteworthy and unfortunate responses to Obama's remark came from Bill O'Reilly. During the February 19th edition of his nationally syndicated radio show, O'Reilly took a call from a listener who said of Michelle Obama, "I just wanted to say that I think Michelle Obama is an angry woman—is speaking, I think, with her real voice for the first time" O'Reilly asked the caller to explain her views. The caller responded by saying, "Well your representative asked me not to talk about this, but I have a friend who had knowledge of her and said to me months ago, 'This is a very angry,' her word was 'militant woman'" (Ironsides, 2008). O'Reilly then responded

What I want you to do then, Maryanne...I want you to stay on the line. Because it's not fair to Michelle Obama for you—because we don't know who you are, and we don't know who your friend is, but we want to know. We want to know, OK. But it's not fair at this point for you to say, "My friend said X and Y," because we just don't know. But if you would give us your information, we would like to talk to your friend. And then whatever your friend tells us, we'll track it down. We'll do it in a fair and balanced and methodical way. That's how we're going to cover this campaign—all of them, all of them. So stay on the line, give us your information. If indeed Michelle Obama is angry about something, if she has a history, we would like to know that, and then we can put it into some kind of context so that we can be fair to everybody.

You know, I have a lot of sympathy for Michelle Obama, for Bill Clinton, for all of these people. Bill Clinton, I have sympathy for him, because they're thrown into a hopper where everybody is waiting for them to make a mistake, so

that they can just go and bludgeon them. And, you know, Bill Clinton and I don't agree on a lot of things, and I think I've made that clear over the years, but he's trying to stick up for his wife, and every time the guy turns around, there's another demagogue or another ideologue in his face trying to humiliate him because they're rooting for Obama.

That's wrong. And I don't want to go on a lynching party against Michelle Obama unless there's evidence, hard facts, that say this is how the woman really feels. If that's how she really feels—that America is a bad country or a flawed nation, whatever—then that's legit. We'll track it down. (Ironsides, 2008)

O'Reilly use of “lynching party” referring to media backlash against Michelle Obama was unfortunate and produced its own moment of media backlash against O'Reilly. Keith Olbermann shamed O'Reilly for his comment and was able to refer to the words of the president (George W. Bush) who said the week prior that, “Some Americans do not understand the effect that references to nooses and lynching can still have” (“Olberman Slams,” 2008). In an editorial for the *Huffington Post*, Star Jones found the remarks to be indefensible regardless of the context. She wrote

How dare this white man with a microphone and the trust of the public think that in 2008, he can still put the words “lynch and party” together in the same sentence with reference to a black woman; in this case, Michelle Obama? I don't care how you “spin it” in the “no spin zone,” that statement in and of itself is racist, unacceptable and inappropriate on every level. (Jones, 2008)

Initially, O'Reilly's producer defended the comment noting that his remarks were delivered in defense of Obama and an “obvious repudiation of anyone attacking Michelle Obama” (Bercovici, 2008). Eventually, O'Reilly did offer an apology for his allusion to lynch mobs by

suggesting he was trying to defend Michelle Obama (and only speaking of lynching in the “high tech” sense as did Clarence Thomas during his Supreme Court nomination hearings in 1991) (“Bill O’Reilly Apologizes,” 2008). Even in a context of defense, O’Reilly’s reaction to Michelle Obama’s “proud of my country” remark was representative of an unfortunate conservative (over)reaction. The popularity of Bill O’Reilly, his radio program, and *The O’Reilly Factor* on the Fox News Network (where this event and its response was discussed for days) gave the “proud of my country” moment much more traction in the national media news cycle.

As Barack Obama clinched the Democratic nomination for president, he and members of his campaign realized that Michelle Obama could be both a liability and an asset as they transitioned to focus on the general election. The initial wave of attacks aimed at his wife prompted Barack Obama to address the growing controversy in an interview on *Good Morning America* where he stated, “I would never think of going after somebody’s spouse in a campaign. She loves this country. And especially for people who purport to be promoters of family values—to start attacking my wife in a political campaign, I think, is detestable” (Ibanga, 2008).

As an immediate reaction to the backlash she faced over the “proud of my country” remark, the content and tone of her campaign speeches began to change. Prior to “proud of my country,” Those trailing Michelle Obama as she campaigned for her husband noted that her speeches sounded “stark and stern” compared with her husband’s exhilarating addresses. Where Barack Obama was “all about the promise; she’s more about the problem” (Gibbs & Newton-Small, 2008). Michelle Obama’s early campaign speeches called into question the country’s lack of fairness, widespread cynicism among American citizens, and how we are “not where we need to be” (Zakin, 2007). Michelle Obama worried aloud several times in campaign addresses about Americans who “spend more time talking about what we can’t do, what won’t work, what can’t change” (Gibbs & Newton-Small, 2008). Speaking about her childhood on numerous

occasions, Obama recalled crumbling neighborhoods and failing schools on Chicago's Southside, a lack of health care services, shrinking pensions, and overworked and underpaid single parents. Obama would relate to her audiences that, "this has been the case for my entire lifetime," and worried that "we're raising a generation of young doubters" children who are insular and timid (Gibbs & Newton-Small, 2008). Many noted Michelle Obama's bleak outlook for the future of America's youth who "don't try, because they already heard us tell them why they can't succeed" (Hewitt, 2008).

There is a stark contrast between the thematic elements of Michelle Obama's campaign addresses before her "proud of my country" remark and after. Broadly speaking, Michelle Obama's stump speeches transitioned from a look backward to the hardships she and her family faced in Chicago to looking forward in a way that largely was consistent with the message her husband had been delivering in his campaign speeches. In a speech to campaign workers on the eve of the primary election in Kentucky, Michelle Obama admitted that we do live in isolation sometimes, "but the truth is that people want the same thing. They're tired of the divisions, they want peace, they want fairness, they want equity" ("Obama Podcast," 2008). On April 27, 2008 in Fort Wayne, Indiana Obama talked about the broad themes in her husband's campaign speeches and by doing so she merged her rhetoric more closely with his as she emphasized the promise of empathy and community. Also in this speech Obama moved from a perspective that looks backward to what Americans have lost toward a forward-looking perspective that shows her husband's election as a major step toward reclaiming America's promise. She stated Barack has been asking us this whole election to look at ourselves differently and inspiration and hope is all a huge part of that. You know, the fact that we've lost sight of the fact that we are one another's brothers and sisters keepers in this nation—that we have to be prepared to sacrifice something big for the greater good—and in order to do that we have to feel some faith and trust

and inspiration in our leadership. And I don't think that there's anyone else in this race who's going to be able to unify this country, who's going to be able to change the way politics is done, who's going to bring people together who didn't think that they had anything in common before, and who's going to do it in a way that is decent and honest. That man is my husband, Barack Obama. ("Michelle Obama Campaign Speech," 2008).

After her "proud of my country" remark, Michelle Obama's campaign stump speeches began to transition away from a pronounced focus on the failures of America's past and began to focus more directly on the hope and promise of a Barack Obama presidency. More than her husband, Michelle Obama's campaign speeches continued to tell hard truths, but they also began to adopt more of the "Yes, We Can" thematic elements that had been less a part of her rhetoric before this point in the campaign. There is evidence that Michelle Obama's rhetorical recalculation did not quash all questions about whether she was a political liability in her husband's campaign. In May of 2008, an editorialist for BBC News asked whether Michelle Obama is "Barack's Bitter or Better Half" and began to chart the progress of her media makeover (Levinson, 2008). On the cover of the June 2, 2008 issue of *Time* magazine the question was asked, "Will Michelle Obama Hurt Barack in November" (Gibbs & Newton-Small, 2008). John L. Jackson Jr. penned a column in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* titled, "Michelle Obama, Anti-American?" to argue that patriotism includes critique of one's country (2008).

During the first week of May 2008, the existence of a video purportedly showing Michelle Obama using the term "whitey" to refer to George W. Bush was made known to the public and was to be released soon thereafter. The origin of the video was unclear (rumors of the video first appeared on several conservative blogs: Wonkette, Andrew Sullivan, and Balloon Juice) and the authenticity of the video immediately was questioned by more mainstream

conservative talking heads (Malkin, 2008b). Reportedly, the video was to show Michelle Obama at a Rainbow/PUSH conference in 2004 hosted by Khadijah Farrakhan (wife of Louis Farrakhan) speaking out against “whiteys” and her contempt for the current president (Malkin, 2008b). After several delays of the video’s release and some investigation, it was determined that the video did not exist (Geraghty, 2008; Robertson, 2008).

Yet, the video hoax received enough attention in the national media that the Obama campaign felt it necessary to respond and debunk. On June 12, 2008 the Obama campaign launched a website to counter what the campaign described as “smears” against the candidate (“Obama hits back,” 2008). The “Fight the Smears” website focused on claims that Barack Obama was not a natural-born citizen, rumors surrounding his relationship with Bill Ayers, and claims that Obama was a Muslim. However, it appears that the attacks against Michelle Obama played a role in prompting the Obama campaign to launch the website:

According to campaign officials, what finally launched Obama into a full rumor counteroffensive was a story that apparently first made a big splash on the Internet in late May in a post by pro-Hillary Clinton blogger Larry Johnson. Quoting “someone in touch with a senior Republican,” Johnson claimed that there was a video of Michelle Obama “blasting ‘whitey’ during a rant at Jeremiah Wright’s church.” (Later versions of the rumor had Michelle’s “rant” happening at a Rainbow/PUSH Coalition conference.) No such videotape has surfaced. (Tumulty, 2008)

Reportedly, Michelle’s “mystery tape rumor” received the most traffic on the newly launched Fight the Smears website, and the Obama campaign worked to thoroughly unearth the origin of the rumors (eventually showing the hoax to be a work of fiction lifted “almost word for word from a novel published in 2006”) (Tumulty, 2008). Albeit debunked by the Obama campaign,

the video was a culmination of a handful of other rumors and campaign gaffes that landed major blows to Michelle Obama's public ethos and likability. Polls taken at the end of May 2008 showed Michelle Obama's unfavorability rating at the highest point in the campaign—close to half of Americans disapproved of Michelle Obama and a full quarter expressed a strong dislike (Langley, 2008).

Softer, Happier: The New Michelle

It is at this point that the Obama campaign made the decision to attempt to relaunch Michelle Obama. More needed to be done to soften her image in addition to a new message in her campaign stump speeches. Now her husband's presidential campaign was giving her image "a subtle makeover," a new campaign message to emphasize her humble roots, and a tough new chief of staff (Powell & Kantor, 2008). The plan never involved removing Michelle Obama from the campaign spotlight—she was to remain a visible presence with a new role and new script. Going forward she would be tasked with assuring voters that she was not the Angry Black Woman that stereotypes and rumors appeared to confirm. She would need to promise voters that she was not interested in running for co-president. She was a cheerleader for her husband whose primary responsibility was caring for him and her children.

On Wednesday, June 18, 2008 Michelle Obama appeared as a guest co-host on ABC's midmorning talk show, *The View*. She used the opportunity to soften her image, speak directly to her critics, and to show herself to be something different than the Angry Black Woman caricature popularized by the cable news networks and Internet bloggers at that time. Obama began by giving each of the other co-hosts a fist bump—a way of joking about the famous bump that she had exchanged with her husband the night he clinched the Democratic presidential nomination in St. Paul, Minnesota. The reaction to the fist bump was overblown—described by the Fox News anchor E.D. Hill as a "terrorist fist jab" (Holden, 2008). On *The View*, Obama

confessed to not being “hip” and credited younger campaign staffers for showing her the gesture: “I got that from the young staff. It’s the new high five” (Stanley, 2008).



(Fenn, 2008)

During the first segment of the show (a roundtable discussion known as “Hot Topics” to regular viewers of *The View*), the discussion largely centered on the Obama’s campaign’s recent effort to soften Michelle’s image—beginning with her appearance on *The View* that day. Thus, after the requisite fist bumps producer and co-host, Barbara Walters, asked Obama to explain and clarify her “proud of my country” remark.

I am proud of my country—without a doubt. I think when I talked about it during my speech, what I was talking about was having a part in the political process.

People are just engaged in this election in a way that I haven’t seen in a long time and I think everybody has agreed with that, that people are focused, they’re coming out. (BarackObama.com, 2008)

When asked about why she had become the focus of attacks during the political campaign, Obama hypothesized that the 24-hour cable news networks and the Internet were partly to blame,

but that in the end this treatment was something that comes with the territory. Obama acknowledged that the current First Lady, Laura Bush, came to her defense in the wake of the “proud of my country” backlash and said publicly that the media’s reaction to Obama’s statement was unfortunate. Obama stated she had sent a note to Bush thanking her for her kind words, and admitted to admiring her:

That’s what I like about Laura Bush. You know, just calm, rational approach to these issues, and I’m taking some cues. You know, there’s a balance—there’s a reason why people like her. It’s because she doesn’t fuel the fire.

(BarackObama.com, 2008)

The conversation turned to another First Lady (and her husband’s main competitor during the Democratic primary), Hillary Clinton. Obama acknowledged the rampant sexism Clinton faced during her campaign for the presidency, and although she did not win the nomination her presence in the race (“18 million cracks in the class ceiling”) made it easier for women to run for president in the future (BarackObama.com, 2008). Barbara Walters asked a question many Americans likely were thinking at the conclusion of the 2008 Democratic primary race: “Should Hillary Clinton be your husband’s running mate” (BarackObama.com, 2008)? Obama eagerly announced that she would be completely removed from the process (“I’m just glad I will have nothing to do with it”) which maneuvered away from a public impression of her as desiring to be a co-president (BarackObama.com, 2008). A few minutes later, Obama admitted that initially she did not want her husband to run for president or get into politics altogether. Earlier in her life, Michelle Obama considered politics to be a “mean business” and felt her husband was to “sweet” and “empathetic” to effectively function in the political world (BarackObama.com, 2008).

During the show, topics ranged from protecting her children from the media spotlight, sleeveless dresses, and her decision to not wear pantyhose. Described by one critic as nearly “flawless,” Obama’s remarks on the show were designed not to take over the room (Hinkley, 2008). She tried to be “one of the girls,” pointedly steering the conversation to inclusive topics like raising children and fashion. The show concluded with a segment on proper breakfasts, where Obama confessed that for protein in the morning, she and her family skip the low-fat yogurt in favor of bacon. Obama’s appearance on *The View* was an effective counter to the media caricature of an Angry Black Woman. She came across as calm and feminine—smart and articulate, not aggressive and set on her own ambitions. Yet, one television appearance does not a stereotype change. It was a singular moment in the campaign and critically important to the Obama team’s effort to neutralize months of negative portrayals, innuendo, and rumor.

The same week that Michelle Obama co-hosted *The View* the Obamas were interviewed for an issue of *Us Weekly Magazine*—a celebrity gossip magazine that covers topics ranging from celebrity relationships to the latest trends in fashion, beauty, and entertainment. Hitting newsstands the week that the Obama campaign was launching a softer side of Michelle Obama, the magazine is a telling artifact. The issue both recognizes the stereotypes that many had about Michelle Obama and it put into print the campaign’s initial strategy for combating rumors and innuendo.

The cover of the magazine was all that the Obama campaign wanted the reader to know about the new Michelle Obama. Barack and Michelle Obama appear on the cover of the magazine in an embrace along with the caption “Michelle Obama: Why Barack Loves Her.” The caption indicates that even though both of the Obamas had been interviewed by the magazine, the focus was on Michelle. The sub-caption reveals to readers that Michelle Obama shops at Target, loves the television show *Sex and the City*, and fulfills ordinary mom duties.



(Alston, 2008)

Revealing the mega-retailer and the popular HBO television series as evidence of Obama's ordinary consumption habits was strategic. Both Target and *Sex and the City* appeal to middle-to-upper-class, educated, white women. A press release on the Target Corporation's website details the demographic background of the typical Target shopper:

Target shoppers have a median age of 46—the youngest among major retailers.

The median household income of Target guests is \$55,000. Forty-three percent of Target shoppers have completed college. More than half of Target guests are employed in professional or other managerial positions. Eighty to ninety percent

of Target guests are female. Thirty-eight percent of guests have children at home—or in a red shopping cart with them. This figure is consistently more than any other discount store’s customer profile. (“Target’s Unique Guests,” 2006)

Target does not speak directly to the racial demographics of their shoppers on their website; however, other researchers have identified the typical Target shopper as white (O’Donnell, 2005). Over the last five years, one of the Target Corporation’s main objectives has been to make inroads in less affluent, urban markets which suggest that initially this was not a target demographic for the corporation (Hudson & McWilliams, 2006; Singh, 2007).

Sex and the City is a comedy-drama television series that ran on HBO from 1998 to 2004. Set in New York City, the show follows the lives of a group of four white women—three in their mid-thirties and one in her forties—who tackle relevant social issues like sexuality, sexually transmitted diseases, and safe sex. There is consensus among critics and academics that the show was “produced with a predominantly white audience in mind” (Baxter, 2009; Jermyn, 2009, p. 83). Additionally, criticism was consistently aimed at the show’s creators and producers for its depiction of racially segregated friendships, a handful of token minority characters over the course of six seasons, and a New York City suspiciously free of diversity (Burke, 2010; Jermyn, 2009; Wingfield, 2008).

Revealing Michelle Obama’s shopping and television viewing preferences on the cover of *Us Weekly* was more than just an attempt by the Obama administration to show her to be ordinary. The Obamas appearance in this publication personalized the couple for the magazine’s 11 million weekly readers, but more specifically it “makes them accessible and ultimately, easily digestible to the female, 18-54 demographic that these magazines own” (Ogunnaike, 2008). The content of the interview covers topics including trips to Target, Sudoku, bad hair days, dance

recitals, and (of course) reading *Us Weekly* (O’Leary, 2008). The presidential candidate does his part in the interview, noting that

Michelle is an extraordinary mother to our two girls. When we started out on this campaign we wanted to make sure that life for our girls would remain as normal as possible, and it is because of Michelle that they are so grounded. Nothing is more important to Michelle than being a good mother, and she works everyday to instill in our girls the same values we were raised with. (O’Leary, 2008, p. 53)

The subtext is that Michelle Obama is simply another bargain-hunting soccer mom struggling with the same day-to-day issues of most (middle-class, white) American moms. The magazine profile, “which is as fluffy as a down comforter,” comes complete with several adorable family photos that made Michelle Obama appear “to be far more Clair Huxtable than Angela Davis” (Ogunnaike, 2008).

The Obama campaign’s effort to soften Michelle Obama’s public image should be understood within the campaign’s broader efforts to get control of problematic rumors and innuendos circulating about the Obamas after the Democratic nomination for president had been won. At approximately the same time that Michelle Obama was co-hosting *The View* and appearing on the cover of *Us Weekly*, the Obama campaign was fully engaged in an effort to control the media’s message regarding its candidate. For example, on Monday, June 16, 2008 two incidents occurred which illustrate the new, painstaking efforts the Obama campaign undertook at this time. At a campaign rally in Detroit, two Muslim women reported that they were prohibited from sitting on the risers behind the candidate because they were wearing head scarves and campaign volunteers did not want them to appear with Obama in news photographs or live television coverage (Rutenberg & Zeleny, 2008). That same day, the campaign barred cameras from a large gathering of African-American civic leaders attended by Barack Obama

and refused to provide names of religious figures Obama met with (Rutenberg & Zeleny, 2008). Senior advisor to the Obama campaign, Anita Dunn, was asked to comment on the noticeable effort to control media access and messaging and said, “One of the challenges that we are confronting very directly is dealing with the rumors and the e-mails, the inaccurate information about Senator Obama and Michelle Obama and we’re going to deal with that very aggressively through a number of mediums” (Rutenberg & Zeleny, 2008). The sudden attempt at a more sophisticated level of discipline caused some campaign observers to see the behavior as hypocritical for a candidate running on promises of openness and transparency (Cohen, 2008; Gerstein, 2008). Aides said that the Obama campaign remained committed to transparency, and that the increased effort to control messaging was typical of any presidential campaign (Rutenberg & Zeleny, 2008).

The Obama campaign’s effort to reintroduce Michelle Obama on *The View* and in *Us Weekly* heavily relied on use of the feminine style of communication. The campaign recognized that the feminine style is an outgrowth of a set of feminine characteristics based on a hierarchy of values—mainly nurturance and caregiving. The characteristics of the feminine style likely seemed a viable option for the Obama campaign to redeploy Michelle Obama’s public identity because they have long been a central feature of the way in which Americans imagine an ideal first lady. As co-host of *The View*, Michelle Obama was given abundant opportunities to state plainly her commitment to the core values of the feminine style and ideal first ladyship. In *Us Weekly*, those who know Michelle Obama best (namely her husband) made a public testament to the future first lady’s dedication to her priorities: the love and care of her children and husband. Like other publicly visible women who have employed a feminine style, Michelle Obama (and the campaign) was intent on transposing private values into her public discourse and identity.

The initial effort by the campaign to rebrand Michelle Obama's public identity utilized a conservative, feminine style that placed her squarely within a traditional model of first ladyship. The campaign worked along a trajectory which reaffirmed traditional sex roles and responsibilities for the potential first lady. They also supported the patriarchal notion that a woman's most natural duty is to care for the family. The campaign (re)presented Michelle Obama as a woman who wanted little else aside from tending to her household tasks, raising her daughters, and worrying about her husband. The conservative framework of the feminine style was not new or unique when the Obama campaign remodeled its candidate for first lady in late June 2008. In fact, communication scholars have argued extensively about the conservative nature of the feminine style (Blankenship & Robson, 1995; Dow & Tonn, 1993; Hiatt, 1978; Perry-Giles & Perry-Giles, 1996). Yet, with the possible exception of Hillary Clinton, never before had the feminine style been used to resurrect one's identity and reassure the American public that a (potential) first lady will fulfill a traditional role. Unlike Clinton, in the case of Michelle Obama the feminine style was used to diffuse racial fears and a stereotype of an angry, Black woman.

There is evidence that the campaign's early efforts to soften Michelle Obama's image in late June 2008 had been effective. For instance, polling data indicated that her likability started to rebound (up to 50% from 43% by the end of July) and her unfavorability ratings began to decrease (down 5% by the end of July) (Newport, 2008). Additionally, the media narrative on Michelle Obama began to change in a way that the Obama campaign likely found to be desirable. There was a concentrated focus on her appearance and sense of fashion—with special focus on the dress she wore as co-host on *The View* (Allen-Mills, 2008; Celizic, 2008; Doyle, 2008; Graham, 2008; Haynes, 2008; Malcolm, 2008a; Whitworth, 2008). Related to her fashion

sense, more attention was directed at her body—specifically her arms (Billups, 2008; Chipman & Jensen, 2008; Martin, 2008).

Setback: The Politics of Fear and *The New Yorker*

Nevertheless, there remained uncertainty about Michelle Obama's true character and the type of first lady she would be if elected. An article appeared in the *New York Times* in late July 2008 that compared the personalities of the two would-be first ladies. There was a consensus that Cindy McCain was positioning herself as the next Laura Bush. The Bush model was "familiar and safe to most Americans," whereas "Michelle Obama ha[d] yet to signal exactly what sort of First Lady she might be" (Healy, 2008). In fact, there was a strand of the media's narrative that began to focus on the Obama campaign's effort at keeping Michelle Obama out of public view and the selectivity of her future media appearances (Healy, 2008).

A more serious public relations blow was dealt to the Obama campaign and their effort at damage control via the July 21st issue of *The New Yorker* magazine. For this issue, the cover of the magazine featured a cartoon drawing of Barack and Michelle Obama in the Oval Office dressed as a Muslim and a Black militant soldier respectively. The cartoon also showed an American flag burning in the fireplace and a picture of Osama bin Laden hanging on the wall.



(Blitt, 2008)

Michelle Obama was depicted with an oversized Afro, army boots, camouflage pants, and an AK-47. Titled “The Politics of Fear,” the magazine explained the cover drawn by artist Barry Blitt as an attempt to satirize “the use of scare tactics and misinformation in the presidential election to derail Barack Obama’s campaign” (Allen, 2008). In an interview with *The Washington Post*, Editor David Remnick said of the brewing controversy:

It’s clearly a joke, a parody of these crazy fears and rumors and scare tactics about Obama’s past and ideology. And if you can’t tell it’s a joke by the flag burning in the Oval Office, I don’t know what more to say. If I started self-censoring myself and my writers and artists because someone might take it askance, I’d publish nothing that wasn’t bland and inoffensive. Satire is offensive sometimes, otherwise it’s not very effective. (Kurtz, 2008)

It is likely that the magazine cover was perceived as a minor moment of crisis for the Obama campaign that called for another round of damage control. The Obama campaign quickly denounced the cover as “tasteless and offensive” and a spokesperson for the McCain campaign immediately announced that they agreed (Bacon Jr., 2008).

The overwhelming majority of the reactions to *The New Yorker* cover suggest that the magazine’s attempt to deliver a satirical message failed. Before the magazine could reach newsstands a significant number of readers and subscribers to *The New Yorker* claimed that they would abandon their subscriptions and described the cover as “gross,” “sick,” and “pathetic” (Lewis, 2008). Media commentators called the cover “incendiary” and “terrorism on the newsstands” (Allen, 2008; Kurtz, 2008). In an editorial for the *Los Angeles Times* Andrew Malcolm spoke to the weakness of satire as a form of argument and as a type of humor:

That’s the problem with satire. A lot of people won’t get the joke. Or won’t want to...A problem is there’s no caption on the cover to ensure that everyone gets the ha-ha-we’ve-collected-almost-every-cliched-rumor-about-Obama-in-one-place-in-order-to-make-fun-of-them punch line. So you’ll no doubt see this image making the internet rounds in coming months by people who don’t want to see the satire. (2008b)

The reaction to the satirical cover suggests that the magazine failed to accomplish its goal of exposing the scare tactics used to derail the Obama campaign. There is evidence that some members of the public had difficulty understanding the objective of the cover. One blogger admitted, “My first impression on seeing this cover was that the *New Yorker* had written an exposé revealing that Barack Obama is indeed a Muslim [and] Michelle Obama was a member of the Black Panthers” (Swift, 2008). The week that the magazine hit newsstands, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* hosted a forum on its website where discussants responded to a thread titled

“New Yorker Cover: I Don’t Get It” (“Chronicle Forums,” 2008). The conversation touched upon the present state of satire, its function in the presidential election, and its danger in reinforcing stereotypes. Other commentators reacted to *The New Yorker’s* controversial cover with disappointment and skepticism over the editor’s indication that ultimately the cover was designed to attract “attention on an otherwise slow-news summer Sunday” in order to sell more magazines (Malcolm 2008b). It is difficult to know if the editorial board of *The New Yorker* considered potential backlash to this cover in its attempt to lampoon racist and xenophobic attitudes directed at the Obamas. While satire was the intent, the impact of the magazine was to remind Americans about these fears—even as the campaign was working diligently to diffuse them.

Conclusion

It is not surprising that the Obama campaign chose *US Weekly* and *The View* as the media outlets to re-introduce Michelle Obama to the American people. Both the magazine and daytime television show were extremely popular among women who were considered to be a prized demographic in the 2008 general election. This orchestrated effort to rebrand Michelle was done with the hope that potential voters would connect with her stories and in turn, increase their trust in Barack Obama. The Obama campaign was well aware of the potential consequences of anti-patriotic, anti-white rumors persisting about Michelle Obama’s character. Not only would she continue to run the risk of being an enormous liability for the campaign, she almost certainly would hinder her husband’s chances of winning the White House.

The publication of *The New Yorker* cover occurred several months after Michelle Obama’s “proud of my country for the first time” remarks, and it hit newsstands approximately one month after the Obama campaign began to launch the new, softer Michelle Obama. The reaction to the cover broadly suggests that problematic attitudes and fears surrounding the

Obamas persisted. According to a poll taken after *The New Yorker* cover, Michelle Obama's polling numbers slumped once again (unfavorability: 35% and likability: 30%) (Cox, 2008). Curiously, her husband's likability rating was increasing to record levels (Cox, 2008). Among strictly white voters Michelle Obama's polling data looked even worse (Cox, 2008).

The handling of and reaction to Michelle Obama during this phase of the 2008 presidential election reflects America's schizophrenic relationship with strong, Black femininity. Many in the media saw Michelle Obama as the new Jackie Kennedy and in the next breath sneered at her for coming off as angry and elitist. Numerous news stories focused on her humble upbringing in Chicago and how her story might be relatable to voters, but those stories almost always reminded readers of rumors about "whitey" and her "proud of my country" remark. As we learned of her degrees from Princeton and Harvard, her successful careers in law and hospital administration, and her unwavering support for her husband's presidential aspirations, many could not fully imagine her as a first lady until we were sure she bought her toilet paper at Target.

Michelle Obama relearned how to be feminine and domestic. The Obama campaign pushed her to be both. In an effort to shift her personality away from militant, anti-white representations, the campaign used the opportunity to recast Michelle Obama as a supportive wife who supported traditional family values. The effort to dismantle racist fears and stereotypes of Michelle Obama with imagery of the happy housewife was typical of the way that Black women have always faced the intersections of this paradox in American culture.

CHAPTER FOUR

MRS. OBAMA GOES TO DENVER: USING THE POLITICAL FEMININE STYLE TO REHABILITATE HER IDENTITY AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

By almost all accounts, Michelle Obama's address to the 2008 Democratic National Convention was a success. David Plouffe (2010), Obama's campaign manager, recalls his reaction to Michelle Obama's campaign speech and the immediate effect it had on her favorability rating in national polls:

She delivered an absolute gem. We introduced her with a video narrated by her mother, a beautiful presentation that Michelle's parents, the sacrifices they made and her own improbable success. Her speech built on this and also revealed a side of Barack that many voters had not been exposed to, most memorably with a tender line about Barack driving back from the hospital after their first daughter was born...Michelle's favorable numbers jumped eighteen points that night in our tracking, and they never dropped the rest of the campaign. (p. 301)

Plouffe (2010) recalls that Michelle Obama wanted a draft of her speech a month prior to the convention so that she could become intimately familiar with the address, get comfortable with it, and practice her delivery. In this way, Plouffe (2010) describes her as a "concert pianist"—someone who was "disciplined, regimented, and methodical" leaving little to chance (p. 301). In the end, the campaign chief identifies both Obamas as "clutch performers when the curtain rose" at the convention (Plouffe, 2010, p. 302).

A broad sampling of reporters, commentators, and politicians reveals a consensus that Michelle Obama delivered an effective speech. John Heilemann observed that reaction to Obama's speech was almost universally positive and that she effectively "humanized herself as a daughter and a mother, grounded herself in the working-class experience, displayed humility and

empathy” (Heilemann, 2008). John Nichols of *The Nation* stated, “The woman who would be first lady rose to the challenge with a speech that was as gracious as it was politically smart” (Nichols, 2008). John Dickerson with *Slate* argued that Obama’s speech “showed how alive her husband’s message is in her own heart” and that the Obamas “empathy comes from their own experiences” (Dickerson, 2008). Howard Wolfson, Hillary Clinton’s former communications director, praised the speech as a “homerun” saying it was a successful attempt “to shore up the image of Michelle Obama and help Americans become comfortable with her as First Lady” (Wolfson, 2008). The *National Review*’s Kathryn Jean Lopez also used the word “homerun” to describe Obama’s DNC speech noting that the remote linkup with the rest of her family at the conclusion of her address capped an emotional family tableau (Lopez, 2008).

There is broad consensus that Michelle Obama’s speech to the 2008 Democratic National Convention was a success. Without question, Obama accomplished her goals: to make her and her family more familiar to American voters, to continue her own makeover which had been underway for two months and to support and humanize her husband. The Obama campaign had been working diligently crafting a softer, happier identity for Michelle Obama, and there is ample evidence (outlined in the previous chapter) that the campaign’s efforts had paid off. Obama’s makeover as a happy housewife culminated with her speech to the DNC, and after this event her popularity skyrocketed.

This chapter is less of an exploration as to whether Michelle Obama’s speech was a success, but rather the reasons for its effectiveness. Obama’s speech to the DNC evoked a feminine style to accomplish both of her broad goals for this speech. In addition to making the American people more familiar with her family, Michelle Obama’s use of three dominant characteristics of the feminine style reassured her audience that as first lady her primary responsibility would be to care for her family. First and foremost, Michelle Obama spoke about

her duty and destiny as a caregiver for her family, and used personal experience to support her claims. Consistent with other speakers who utilize the feminine style, Obama politicized her personal experience and her family's history. Finally, Obama exhibited what Dow and Tonn (1993) refer to as a feminine ethic of care which is an expression of compassion for the well-being of others and a valuation of the individual.

Along with conservative values of traditional womanhood, Michelle Obama evoked a communitarian version of the American Dream that had been (and continues to be) a central theme in her and her husband's political discourse. Materialistic and moralistic elements of the secular myth of the American Dream have been prominent themes in American public address dating back to the colonial era (Bercovitch, 1978; Fisher, 1973). Barack Obama deployed a communitarian trajectory of the secular myth of the American Dream the first time he addressed a national audience at the 2004 Democratic National convention (Rowland & Jones, 2007). I argue in this chapter that, like her husband, Michelle Obama worked to recast and reclaim a liberal narrative trajectory of the American Dream. Paradoxically, Michelle Obama's liberal narrative of the American Dream was combined with a feminine style that is inherently conservative. The contrasting ideologies illustrate the bind Michelle Obama faced throughout the 2008 presidential campaign as well as the traditional public/private dichotomy that American women face every day. As she echoes her husband's vision of the American Dream with progressive, communitarian values, she supports her arguments by blurring the distinction between public and private responsibilities. Obama's emphasis on her traditional roles as a woman links the progress of American society with a woman's dedication to domestic life.

In the remainder of this chapter, I first provide an overview of the secular myth of the American Dream and demonstrate the ways that politicians evoke the myth as a vehicle for political ideology. Briefly, I trace the way that the American Dream myth has undergone a

pendulum swing over the last thirty years from a narrative associated with conservative ideology during Reagan's presidency to a more progressive narrative under Obama. I review Dow and Tonn's (1993) model of a political feminine style which incorporates traditional feminine values and communication styles. At that point, I shift my focus to Michelle Obama's address to the Democratic National Convention in 2008 and show how her speech evokes a communitarian vision of the American Dream consistent with her husband's rhetoric. I show Obama's progressive vision for America to be filtered through a feminine style that is inherently conservative. Finally, I conclude with an evaluation of the speech arguing that its effectiveness is due largely to a discursive balance of political ideologies. A progressive, communitarian vision for America is made possible through a return to traditional roles for women.

The Secular Myth of the American Dream

The narrative of the American Dream has been treated by communication scholars as a form of secular myth. Rowland and Jones (2007) argue that the American Dream is best characterized as a form of political romance in that the superiority of the hero is reflected in his/her values and accomplishments, but that the hero lacks the power and authority found in myth. The American Dream is the embodiment of classic American liberalism—a political ideology which supports democratic institutions limited by the principles laid out in the nation's founding documents (Rowland & Jones, 2007). The secular myth of the American Dream, therefore, is a vehicle for ideology. The Democratic and Republican parties both use the American Dream to articulate progressive and conservative visions for the nation respectively. Each party uses the American Dream as a framework for articulating that party's ideology to show that it is in a better position to deliver on the promises of classical liberalism—"a society in which ordinary people" who work hard and play by the rules "have the opportunity to make a better life" (Rowland & Jones 2007, p. 430).

The key point is that the American Dream takes the form of a narrative in which Americans find themselves on a journey toward a better society—to leave for future generations an America better than the one they inherited. James Truslow Adams (1931) popularized the phrase “American Dream” in *Epic of America* and describes the narrative as “a dream of being able to grow to fullest development as man and woman, unhampered by the barriers which had slowly been erected in the older civilizations” (p. 77). Almost all versions of the story include a strong sense of individual initiative, a belief in progress and success, and the idea that Americans may improve their lives.

The political ideology that dominates the American Dream has shifted over time. In the following section, I trace the ideological shifts of the American Dream since the Reagan administration. Reagan was successful in articulating a vision of the American Dream that underscored the importance of personal values and responsibility and deemphasized the role of government (Rowland & Jones, 2007). Reagan’s version of the American Dream remained the dominant narrative in American political discourse well after his presidency ended. In fact, it is not until the waning years of George W. Bush’s presidency that an ideological shift away from Reagan’s American Dream gains popularity.

Beginning with his speech to the Democratic National Convention in 2004, Barack Obama outlined a progressive, ideological shift that embodied a communitarian American Dream. A communitarian American Dream narrative would become a central theme in Obama’s discourse during the next four years—especially after his announcement to run for president in early 2007. In his attempt to swing the ideological pendulum of the American Dream, Barack Obama did not completely disavow the emphasis on individual values that had characterized Reagan’s ideological perspective. Obama’s communitarian American Dream began from the premise that personal values and a strong sense of individual responsibility serve

as a crucial foundation from which to rehabilitate and strengthen communities. The health of American communities is reliant on individual responsibility as well as effective government. For Obama, the resources made available to individuals and communities by an effective government apparatus see to it that middleclass families who work hard have an opportunity to provide a better life for their children and future generations. The communitarian American Dream places a sustained focus on social responsibility for achieving progress toward key goals.

Ronald Reagan and the Conservative Trajectory of the American Dream

Rowland and Jones (2007) identify the three defining characteristics of the American Dream narrative as “a scene defined by opportunity, agency defined by personal and societal values that allow for the opportunity to be fulfilled, and a protagonist who enacts the personal values in order to achieve a better life” (pp. 431-32). The authors argue that the characteristics of the American Dream are intertwined and influence each other. The hero achieves the American Dream by enacting personal values. A scene of opportunity is defined by a combination of personal and societal values. Thus, the determining factor of whether an American Dream narrative is deployed along a conservative or a liberal trajectory is the particular narrative’s emphasis on either personal or societal values.

The modern day conservative trajectory of the American Dream was popularized by Ronald Reagan who emphasized individual values over collective, societal values (Rowland & Jones, 2007). In his public address Reagan often drew upon the narratives of early American colonists and pioneers as a way of showing a strong individual work ethic to be central to American heroism and the American Dream. Reagan frequently evoked jeremiadic themes in his public address which described America as failing to live up to its promise by straying from conservative values (Johannesen, 1986; Lewis, 1987). Reagan would emphasize the family, faith, and hard work as a way for Americans to reclaim our promise and the American Dream.

Central to Reagan's vision of reclaiming the American Dream was the heroism of ordinary Americans who worked to create the conditions for societal progress (Rowland & Jones, 2007). Reagan recognized the responsibilities of the individual as paramount to American progress—far more so than the responsibilities that government had to the individual.

In a narrative sense, we continued to live in Reagan's America well after his presidency ended. In his address to the Democratic Leadership Council in 1993, Bill Clinton articulated a narrative of the American Dream that largely remained consistent with a conservative narrative that emphasized individual responsibilities and hard work (Hochschild, 1996). In his speech Clinton said, "The American Dream that we were all raised on is a simple but powerful one—if you work hard and play by the rules you should be given a chance to go as far as your God-given-ability will take you" (Clinton, 1993). In this sentence (and throughout his presidency) Clinton continued to tell a story about the American Dream where ordinary Americans were heroes, faith and family were the core values of the narrative, and progress was made possible through hard work. In his speech to the DLC in 1993 Clinton captured the shared presumptions of many Americans about the ideology of the American Dream. Clinton's statement answered several key questions about the ideology inherent to the American Dream myth: Who may pursue the American Dream? Of what does the pursuit consist? How does this pursuit happen? And why is pursuit of the American Dream the focus of our deepest levels of commitment as American citizens? According to Clinton's articulation of the narrative, the answer to "who" is everyone regardless of traits, background or personal history. The answer to "what" is the reasonable anticipation (though not guarantee) of success however it is defined by the individual. The answer to "how" is through one's own actions and hard work. The answer to "why" is that one's dignity and self-worth is associated with a pursuit of the American Dream. The pursuit, in

and of itself, is virtuous. Clinton's narrative enactment of the American Dream was broadly consistent with Reagan's narrative and a sign of conservative ideological dominance.

George W. Bush solidified a conservative narrative of the American Dream with his discourse during his presidency. Bush framed the American Dream in relation to the responsibilities and commitment of the individual, strengthening traditional families and faith. In the aftermath of September 11, 2001 and in preparation for the U.S. invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, Bush cast Americans and individual commitment to patriotism in heroic terms. Bush implored younger Americans to uphold the national covenant of their "elders," the World War II generation, through support of the war on terrorism (Bostdorff, 2003). The promise of the American Dream was realized in Bush's rhetoric on domestic policy by de-legitimizing the government's role in the lives of citizens and arguing that government is an obstacle to individual success (Smith, 2008). At the height of the War on Terror during Bush's first term, political opponents largely marched in lockstep with the president which helped to entrench the conservative narrative of the American Dream (Kellner, 2005). At the same time, it was during the 2004 presidential campaign when an unknown state senator from Illinois spoke at the Democratic National Convention and gained instant national notoriety for his attempt to swing the thematic pendulum of the American Dream back toward a progressive narrative.

Barack Obama's American Dream: Reclaiming Progressive Values

Barack Obama's speech to the Democratic National Convention in July 2004 is noteworthy for its attempt to swing the pendulum of the American Dream narrative back toward collective, social values. When Obama took the stage he was an unknown state senator from Illinois. By the time he concluded his speech nineteen minutes later, he had captured the nation's attention and opened the door for an eventual run for the presidency (Bernstein, 2007). The reaction to Obama's speech was overwhelmingly positive—it was described as "riveting"

and “awe-inspiring” and Obama was deemed “a magician, rhetorically” (Bernstein, 2007; Jurkowitz, 2004; Welna, 2004).

Yet, as thrilling as his speech was, Obama said little that was magical. Critics and historians note that Obama utilized standard techniques for effective speechmaking and delivered a message that many Americans were eager to hear (Bernstein, 2007; Rowland & Jones, 2007). The substance and tone of Obama’s speech was reminiscent of Martin Luther King, Jr. and John F. Kennedy in that it was laden with ambitious and inspirational language. Obama did pull language directly from the reservoir of Ronald Reagan-speak using language such as “the promise of America,” America’s standing as “a beacon of opportunity,” and America as a “shining city on a hill” (“Obama: Time to reclaim,” 2004). While Obama did dip into the Reagan lexicon, thematically he aimed to shift the narrative away from individual heroism that had characterized the conservative trajectory of the American Dream toward social values consistent with a progressive ideology.

In his address, Obama stressed the interconnectedness among Americans by identifying individual and social values that are shared by most people. He identified a key “ingredient” in America’s story is the “belief that we are all connected as one people” (“Obama: Time to reclaim,” 2004). To Obama, literacy in inner-city Chicago, health care for senior citizens, and the civil rights of Arab Americans ought to concern everyone because they are social values and require a cooperate effort to provide and protect. Additionally, Obama made a strong case for the importance of individual values, but immediately after doing so, he showed those values to be consistent with a progressive vision of the American Dream. Like Reagan, Obama focused squarely on the importance of family, hard work, and patriotism. Obama spoke extensively about his own family and the dreams that his father and grandparents had for him. Obama makes the point that his story was just like many Americans’ stories in that most parents and

grandparents want to provide a better life for their children. Unlike Reagan who emphasized extraordinary Americans as the heroes of the American Dream, Obama clearly identified ordinary Americans (like his parents and grandparents) as the heroes in his progressive narrative. For Obama, hard working individuals had been denied success because of a lack of communal support, and the solution was a responsible, effective government to help fulfill the American Dream for those people.

Obama aimed to shift the ideology of the American Dream back toward a narrative in which communitarian, social values are dominant and the success of many Americans is facilitated by an effectively functioning government. Rowland and Jones (2007) argue that this was a significant rhetorical shift in American politics. For the first time in twenty-five years a progressive vision of the American Dream was articulated not by emphasizing the needs of particular marginalized groups, but by framing a narrative which emphasized Americans' shared identity. Obama's trajectory of the American Dream narrative resonated in 2004 after a lengthy period of time in which a conservative narrative dominated American politics. In 2004, many Americans were anxious about America's standing in the world and the health and vitality of the American Dream. At a time when many American jobs were being exported overseas, blue-collar wages were stagnate, and the costs of health care, energy, and food rose dramatically, many wondered whether the American Dream would continue to be a reality for future generations (Herbert, 2006). It was in this climate that Obama offered Americans an opportunity to reclaim the American Dream by recognizing our shared values and the potential for effective government to provide Americans with a better future.

The trajectory of the American Dream which featured prominently in Barack Obama's first speech to a national audience at the 2004 DNC would go on to become a major theme in his campaign during his run for the presidency in 2008 (Wolffe, 2010). Like her husband, Michelle

Obama adopted a communitarian vision of the American Dream as she campaigned in 2007-08. During early campaign events, Michelle Obama described her family's history in a manner similar to her husband. Michelle Obama spoke about her modest upbringing growing up on the South side of Chicago (Bennetts, 2007). She discussed her hardworking parents and the sacrifices they made to provide a better life for her and her brother (Bennetts, 2007). Additionally, Obama spoke about the importance of public education, financial aid, and scholarships that made her successful career possible (Bennetts, 2007). With jeremiadic themes, Obama often focused on the ways in which America (specifically its leaders) had failed to keep its promise to hardworking, middleclass families. Electing her husband would be the first step toward reclaiming America's promise for the middleclass and restoring the American Dream.

In an earlier chapter I described how the Obama campaign made adjustments to Michelle Obama's campaign stump speech to combat rumor and innuendo after the "proud of my country" moment. Conservative columnists accused her of being unpatriotic and identified her campaign speeches as further evidence that she simmers with undigested racial anger. There was a growing concern from within the Obama campaign that Michelle Obama's speeches focused more on the failures of America's leaders and policies while her husband projected a more positive outlook of hope and change (Powell & Kantor, 2008). Adjustments were made to her campaign speeches, and when that failed to fully quell public backlash aimed at Obama, the campaign launched a more comprehensive identity makeover. All indications are that the campaign's effort to recast Michelle Obama as a happy housewife/mother/caregiver successfully shifted attention away from troublesome racial stereotypes. From the time that the Obama campaign undertook efforts to recast Michelle Obama's identity in late June 2008 to the start of the Democratic National Convention at the end of August, the future first lady was withheld

from public view (Rutenberg & Zeleny, 2008). In fact, Michelle Obama's speech to the DNC was her first major event since her appearance as co-host of *The View* in June.

Michelle Obama's 2008 DNC Address: Political Feminine Style and the American Dream

Without question, the stakes were high for Michelle Obama and her address to the 2008 Democratic National Convention. Obama was tasked with continuing the makeover that the campaign had initiated two months prior in June. Michelle Obama's main objectives involved making her and her family more familiar and likable to American voters. She also hoped to humanize the image of her husband. Prior to the speech, many reporters talked about the singular opportunity Michelle Obama had to both shape Americans' views of her husband who remained "more famous than he [was] familiar" as well as quell the anxiety many voters felt about her (Leary, 2008). As reported by senior staffers, Michelle Obama's speech to the DNC was enormously effective and after this event she resumed her status as the Obama campaign's secret weapon.

What is striking about Michelle Obama's 2008 convention speech was her capacity to echo the progressive vision of the American Dream laid out by her husband while simultaneously packaging the narrative (and herself) within the core characteristics of a conservative feminine style. She spoke at length about the landscape of opportunity in America, but framed that discussion by talking about her dreams for her daughters. Michelle Obama identified the heroism of ordinary Americans. She did so by recalling the hard work of her parents and the awe she felt toward her husband's work as a community organizer in Chicago. Just as her husband had attempted to redefine the American Dream by striking a balance between personal and societal values, in this address Michelle Obama strikes a similar thematic balance. In this case the balance is between progressive societal values consistent with her husband's

vision of the American Dream and a conservative reclamation of her own identity through the use of feminine style and domestic virtues.

The following analysis of Michelle Obama's 2008 DNC speech explores her attempt to balance a communitarian vision of the American dream with a conservative feminine style central to rehabilitating her identity. The analysis in this section utilizes Dow and Tonn's (1993) conception of a political feminine style. The authors broaden Campbell's earlier work on the feminine style and focus specifically on the public address of female political actors like first ladies and elected officials. Dow and Tonn (1993) examined the rhetoric of former Texas governor Ann Richards and identified a political feminine style with three prominent features. First, the authors argue that a speaker utilizing the political feminine style will support her arguments with personal experience. This feature allows a rhetor to position herself as an expert of her own lived experience and reveal that knowledge to have a high level of heuristic value. Second, Dow and Tonn (1993) argue that the political feminine style will politicize the personal. The characteristic will allow speakers to make connections between the experiences in their personal lives and the lived experiences of others (often women) drawing special attention to interconnectedness. Finally, the authors argue that the political feminine style will feature a feminine ethic of care. Dow and Tonn (1993) conceive of a feminine ethic of care as rhetorical demonstration of empathy and concern for the welfare of others and a valuation of the dignity of each individual.

For Dow and Tonn (1993) the political feminine style works by melding alternative political ideas with "traditional feminine values" (p. 287). Speakers who utilize the political feminine style often aim to deliver progressive, feminist arguments, yet the nature of the argumentative apparatus is inherently conservative. Typically the evidentiary resources that a speaker will pull from are located within domestic and familial spheres (Fraser, 1994). Dow and

Tonn (1993) argue that the political feminine style works as speakers transform mainstream public argument by incorporating feminine virtues and feminine rhetorical style. While seemingly encapsulating conflicting ideologies, the authors view the tension between conservative feminine roles and progressive arguments as fuel for the power of the political feminine style. Dow and Tonn (1993) argue “that the complexity of women’s social roles...may be an asset in the public sphere, rather than an obstacle. However, such an evaluation requires adjustment of conventional rhetorical, as well as political, wisdom” (p. 299). The political feminine style has the power to transform what arguments are acceptable in the public domain as well as what type of arguments are valid in the public sphere.

Michelle Obama’s speech to the 2008 Democratic National Convention enacts both the communitarian American Dream and the political feminine style.¹ For Obama, the argument she made in this speech was consistent with the argument that Barack Obama and all of his surrogates were making during the campaign—to revise the American Dream narrative so that it was more consistent with communitarian, societal values. The political feminine style was useful for that rhetorical goal as well as her pursuit of a softer, happier public identity. In this speech, Michelle Obama accomplished both of her goals by relying squarely on the three dominant features of the political feminine style by pulling heavily on her personal experience and demonstrating a feminine ethic of care.

Using Personal Experience to Support Claims

Michelle Obama pulled extensively from her personal experience to support a progressive vision of the American Dream and firmly planted herself in the domestic sphere. Obama introduced herself as a woman whose traditional female roles are central to her identity.

¹ For an essay that makes an argument similar to that developed in a portion of this chapter, see Jaclyn Howell’s (2009) essay, “The Power of the Communitarian American Dream: Michelle Obama’s 2008 Democratic National Convention Address” presented at the National Communication Association’s Annual Conference in Chicago, IL.

At the beginning of the speech, Obama identified herself—as do many women—as a sister, a daughter, a wife and a mother “whose girls are the center of my world.” Obama wanted to convey to her audience that she feels her primary responsibility is her role as a mother and as a caregiver to her family. She says:

I come here as a Mom whose girls are the heart of my heart and the center of my world - they're the first thing I think about when I wake up in the morning, and the last thing I think about when I go to bed at night. Their future - and all our children's future - is my stake in this election. (Obama & Vander Pol, 2012, p. 80)

Aside from simply listing her roles as a woman, Obama gives the impression that she values her domestic life most—much more than her public life. Obama used her personal experience as a mother, wife, daughter, and sister to frame her central argument in this speech: that she loves her country and that she and her husband share the majority of Americans’ bedrock values and belief in a dream of a better future. Like many Americans, the American Dream for the Obamas is a dream for their children. Michelle Obama proclaimed that she and her husband feel an obligation to “fight for the world as it should be” to ensure the promise of a better life for their daughters and all children (Obama & Vander Pol, 2012, p. 81).

Like her husband, Michelle Obama pulled from personal history to make clear her support for strong personal values as well as communitarian values at the center of the American Dream. At the beginning of the speech as she described her roles as mother, a sister, a daughter, and a wife, Michelle Obama directly addressed the profound impact that her parents had on her life. Obama said that her stay-at-home mother “has been a sustaining force for our family” and continues to embody the values of “integrity,” “compassion,” and “intelligence”—all virtues that she sees reflected in her own daughters (Obama & Vander Pol, 2012, p. 82). Obama called her father “our rock” who worked much of his adult life through the pain of Multiple Sclerosis but

never stopped smiling, laughing, or working hard to provide for his family. Obama recognized that her parents gave her the greatest gift a child can receive: “never doubting for a single minute that you’re loved, and cherished, and have a place in this world” (Obama & Vander Pol, 2012, p. 82). She concluded a discussion of her family with the summation: “So I know firsthand from their lives—and mine—that the American Dream endures” (Obama & Vander Pol, 2012, p. 82).

In the following paragraph Michelle Obama began to talk about her husband, his family, and the sacrifices his grandparents and his mother made to ensure that he could make a better life for himself. Obama discussed how she and her husband had been instilled with a set of strong personal values including individual responsibility. She stated, “[T]hat you work hard for what you want in life; that your word is your bond and you do what you say you're going to do; that you treat people with dignity and respect” (Obama & Vander Pol, 2012, p. 83). Obama argued that it is her and her husband’s goal to pass along these values to their children “and all children in this nation” so that they know “the only limit to the height of your achievements is the reach of your dreams and your willingness to work for them” (Obama & Vander Pol, 2012, p. 83).

After introducing her husband, his family history, and the personal values they share Michelle Obama transitioned to connect those values to the progressive narrative at the core of the American Dream. She continued to talk about her husband’s personal narrative and the pride she feels about his work as a community organizer in Chicago. While he could have served his own interests after college by taking a job on Wall Street, Barack Obama moved to Chicago to begin working in the neighborhoods there that had been devastated by factory closings and extremely high rates of unemployment and crime. The people in those Chicago neighborhoods were hardworking parents and grandparents living on paycheck to paycheck on fixed incomes who “weren’t asking for a handout or a shortcut” (Obama & Vander Pol, 2012, p. 84). As a community organizer, Barack Obama talked about the dreams of ordinary people—about

working hard and making a better future for their children. Michelle Obama presented her husband's vision (and her own vision) of the American Dream as a societal covenant—a way of measuring the nation's progress based upon “the world as it is” and “the world as it should be” (Obama & Vander Pol, 2012, p. 84).

Michelle Obama attempted to demonstrate her husband's commitment to a vision of the American Dream that reflected a Democratic commitment to strong personal responsibility values and balanced them with a commitment to communitarian virtues and faith in effective government. Throughout her speech Michelle Obama spoke about how Americans have always voiced a commitment to building a better world for their children, future generations, and their communities. Obama declared this to be the “great American story”:

It's the story of men and women gathered in churches and union halls, in town squares and high school gyms—people who stood up and marched and risked everything they had—refusing to settle, determined to mold our future into the shape of our ideals. It is because of their will and determination that this week, we celebrate two anniversaries: the 88th anniversary of women winning the right to vote, and the 45th anniversary of that hot summer day when Dr. King lifted our sights and our hearts with his dream for our nation. (Obama & Vander Pol, 2012, p. 85)

Passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution and MLK's “I Have a Dream” speech during the historic March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom are ideal examples for Obama to mention in this speech. Both of these historic moments in American history began as grassroots social movement. Individuals who wanted to fully participate in democracy, better futures for their children, and to strengthen their communities organized to bring about the changes they desired. The hard work of individuals coupled with effective leadership brought about

progressive social reforms. Like her husband, Michelle Obama sought similar social and economic reforms that would require effective leadership supported by passionate, hardworking Americans.

Politicization of the Personal

In addition to using personal experience to support her arguments, Michelle Obama pulled from her personal relationships, roles, and duties to draw political implications from her personal experience. Obama focused heavily on domestic responsibilities in the private sphere and how those duties are tied to civic engagement because “no matter what our age or background or walk of life each of us has something to contribute to the life of this nation” (Obama & Vander Pol, 2012, p. 87). This is another dimension of the political feminine style that Obama used to show the interconnectedness of the public and private sphere. In addition, Obama’s ability to connect civic responsibility and family duties is consistent with her husband’s vision of the American Dream which places strong emphasis on both personal and societal values.

In this speech Michelle Obama argues that women’s roles are fluid in that most American women find that they have private and public responsibilities and that each set of duties effects the other. Obama identifies the ways that a woman nurtures her family, and as a result, her community. As I noted in the previous section, early in her address Obama stated plainly that her stake in the election is her daughters’ future. Her daughters are the “first thing [she] thinks about in the morning” and the “last thing [she] thinks about before falling asleep at night” (Obama & Vander Pol, 2012, p. 82). Obama makes clear that her responsibilities to her family have called her (and her husband) into public service:

Barack and I...want our children—and all children in this nation—to know that the only limit to the height of your achievements is the reach of your dreams and your willingness to work for them. (Obama & Vander Pol, 2012, p. 86)

Furthermore, it is “all our children’s future” that motivates Obama to work hard to elect her husband (Obama & Vander Pol, 2012, p. 80). In this way, Michelle Obama identifies herself as a mother figure for all American children whose future is the driving force behind her work in this campaign.

Michelle Obama argues that the tremendous sacrifices made by both her parents and her husband’s single mother had a profound impact on their success as adults—an impact that contributed to healthier communities. Obama recognizes that through her parents’ “faith and hard work, [Michelle Obama and her brother, Craig] were able to go to college” and later claimed that her husband was raised with similar values of hard work, dignity, and respect (Obama & Vander Pol, 2012, p. 82-3). These are the values that both Barack and Michelle Obama have had instilled within them by the previous generation and they both have “set out to build lives guided by these values, and pass them on to the next generation” (Obama & Vander Pol, 2012, p. 83). These are the values that pushed Barack Obama away from Wall Street and into the neighborhoods of Chicago’s Southside where he worked as a community organizer. These are the values that caused Michelle Obama to “[leave] a job at a law firm for a career in public service, working to empower young people to volunteer in their communities” (Obama & Vander Pol, 2012, p. 86). Being the daughter of two hardworking parents, being the wife of a community organizer, and being the mother of two young girls makes Michelle Obama realize that “each of us—no matter what our age or background or walk of life—each of us has something to contribute to the life of this nation” (Obama & Vander Pol, 2012, p. 86).

The conclusion of this speech is Michelle Obama's summation of the way that her private life continues to effect her sense of civic duty and the goal of winning the presidency

And as I tuck that little girl and her little sister into bed at night, I think about how one day, they'll have families of their own. And one day, they—and your sons and daughters—will tell their own children about what we did together in this election. They'll tell them how this time we listened to our hopes, instead of our fears. How this time, we decided to stop doubting and to start dreaming. How this time, in this great country—where a girl from the South Side of Chicago can go to college and law school, and the son of a single mother from Hawaii can go all the way to the White House—we committed ourselves to building the world as it should be. (Obama & Vander Pol, 2012, p. 88)

Obama is politicizing the personal throughout the speech by connecting the private sphere (women's roles and family values) with civic responsibility. The health of communities and success of American children and future generations require a strong sense of personal responsibility to fulfill private duties. For Obama, the commitment each American has to our parents, our partners, and our children is the way we care for our family and our community, but personal responsibility is not enough—one also relies on the resources of a healthy community.

A Feminine Ethic of Care

Michelle Obama exhibited what Dow and Tonn (1993) refer to as a feminine ethic of care in the speech. Throughout the address, Obama framed the basic theme in the speech in terms of nurturance and care giving. As a mother, Obama directed this sentiment at her children and future generations of American children. For Obama, what is best for her children (“and all children in this nation”) is best for the health of communities (Obama & Vander Pol, 2012, p.

83). The American Dream is a dream that Americans have for their children—a lesson she learned from her own upbringing:

I stand here today at the crosscurrents of that history—knowing that my piece of the American Dream is a blessing hard won by those who came before me. All of them driven by the same conviction that drove my dad to get up an hour early each day to painstakingly dress himself for work. The same conviction that drives the men and women I've met all across this country. (Obama & Vander Pol, 2012, p. 84)

Michelle Obama embraced a role of caregiver and mother for American children as she seeks to make the dream a reality for as many children as possible.

Obama mentioned children no less than a dozen times in the speech, as she spoke about her own experiences as a mother and her desire to see her daughters live fulfilling lives. Additionally, Obama talked at length about the way she was nurtured by loving parents. Later in the speech Obama reported on her experience campaigning across the country. As she travelled across America she found that most people are “driven by a simple belief that the world as it is just won’t do—that we have an obligation to fight for the world as it should be” (Obama & Vander Pol, 2012, p. 85). Obama identified blue-collar workers, who take on multiple shifts, come home to “kiss their kids goodnight...that goodnight kiss a reminder of everything they’re working for” (Obama & Vander Pol, 2012, p. 85). In a moment which foreshadowed her agenda as first lady, Obama spoke about the sacrifices military servicemen and women make as they leave their families to defend the country. Even though those families “say grace each night with an empty seat at the dinner table” their sacrifice is consistent with a desire to provide a better future for children (Obama & Vander Pol, 2012, p. 85). Obama recognized young volunteers serving communities across the country—community organizers like her husband—“teaching

children, cleaning up neighborhoods, caring for the least among us each and every day” (Obama & Vander Pol, 2012, p. 85). For Obama, there was a connection between nurturing children and caring for American communities. Personal values—specifically familial responsibilities—and social values are inseparable for Obama and both are essential pillars of the American Dream.

Michelle Obama also made it clear that a feminine ethic of care motivated her career choices. She states clearly in her address that she left her career as a lawyer to pursue work as a public servant to “empower young people to volunteer in their communities” (Obama & Vander Pol, 2012, p. 86). More importantly, Michelle Obama described her husband as embodying a feminine ethic of care. In her view, Barack Obama eschewed a life on Wall Street to pursue work as a community organizer in Chicago because he cared more about people than money. He began that work “setting up job training to get people back to work and afterschool programs to keep kids safe—working block by block to help people lift up their families” (Obama & Vander Pol, 2012, p. 87). Again, it was a strong desire to improve the lives of children that became a defining characteristic in the work of both Barack and Michelle Obama. Barack Obama’s agenda as a state senator in Illinois was characterized by “moving people from welfare to jobs, passing tax cuts for hard working families, and making sure women get equal pay for equal work” (Obama & Vander Pol, 2012, p. 87). In addition to his desire to nurture children consistent with a feminine ethic of care, we learn that he worked as an elected official to empower women by lowering their taxes and securing for them higher wages. Michelle Obama went on to identify the reasons that her husband was running for president. In addition to ending the Iraq war and making health care available for every American, Barack Obama pledged to “make sure every child in this nation gets a world class education all the way from preschool to college” (Obama & Vander Pol, 2012, p. 87). The impetus for the Obamas presidential run was to both empower families and rehabilitate communities suffering from an economic recession,

unemployment, and increasing health care costs. For the Obamas families and communities was two parts of one whole. Families and communities have a synergy in that the health of one impacts the other. Both require nurture, attention, and resources that effective government makes possible, and that the Obamas will continue to work to provide.

A feminine ethic of care clearly is consistent with the communitarian American Dream. Throughout the campaign, Barack and Michelle Obama worked to recast the American Dream as a narrative of both personal and social values. Michelle Obama reiterated repeatedly that a communitarian American Dream is the ideal *scene* to offer children a better future, to promote the health of veterans and the elderly, and to strengthen families. Michelle Obama was emphatic in her address to the Democratic National Convention that she and her husband would work tirelessly to provide for the welfare of children and families because that is the only path to healthy communities and to life in America “the way it should be” (Obama & Vander Pol, 2012, p. 85). By using personal experience to support her arguments, politicizing her personal life, and articulating a feminine ethic of care, Michelle Obama accomplished each of her objectives. She made her and her family more familiar and electable. Additionally, the characteristics of the political feminine style were effective in showing Michelle Obama to be—first and foremost—a nurturing mother/wife/daughter/sister.

Response

In the days immediately preceding the Democratic National Convention most national polls reflected the race between Obama and McCain to be locked in a dead heat. In the week before the convention (8/18/08—8/25/08) a CNN/Opinion Research Corp. poll showed both candidates likely to receive 47 percent of the vote (Alliot, 2008). A survey of other national polls conducted during the same week showed single-digit leads for either candidate (Los Angeles Times/Bloomberg: Obama +2; Gallup: Obama +1; Rasmussen: Obama +2; Zogby

International: McCain +5) (“Campaign News,” 2008). While Obama inched out McCain in the majority of the national polls released during the week prior to the convention, he was losing ground to his opponent. A month earlier, Zogby International showed Obama leading 47-40% and the Los Angeles Times/Bloomberg poll had Obama leading by twelve points (Rhee, 2008). Therefore, in the month before the Democratic Party held their convention, the Obama campaign began to slide in the national polls.

By almost all indications, Michelle Obama’s convention speech helped generate a significant bounce for the Obama campaign. Polling data collected during the middle of the Democratic National Convention (after Michelle Obama spoke on Monday the 25th, but before Barack Obama’s address on Thursday the 28th) shows that the Obama campaign started to rebound in national polls. In two national polls released the day after the convention (collected between 8/25 and 8/28) Barack Obama had regained a sizable lead over his opponent. He held an eight point lead in the Gallup tracking poll, and a four point lead in the Rasmussen tracking poll (Silver, 2008). A historical study of convention bounces reveals that on average, a candidate experiences an average bounce of 3.5 points—at the end of the convention (Silver, 2008). Again, national polling data showed the Obama campaign had received an above average bounce, and that is not including the candidate’s keynote address on the final night of the convention. While there were other speakers on the first three nights of the convention, there is ample evidence in polling data and subsequent commentary to suggest that Michelle Obama deserves a good deal of credit for the early convention bounce.

The commentary in response to Michelle Obama’s DNC speech was overwhelmingly positive. The day following her speech, Roger Simon for *Politico* asked “Could the Democrats be about to nominate the wrong Obama?” (Simon, 2008). *The Washington Post* described her “family-themed” speech as “the climax of a dramatic opening day” (Joy, 2008). The response to

the speech confirmed that Michelle Obama had accomplished her objectives. One of the portions of the speech most often reported was her recollection of her husband driving home from the hospital with their new baby daughter “at a snail’s pace...feeling the whole weight of her future in her hands” (Obama & Vander Pol, 2012, p. 86). Obama was describing a simple moment, a real moment, an emotional moment and one that made only one point: “Barack Obama is a human being just like you. He is not an ‘other,’ he is not a ‘celebrity.’ He is a father, a husband, a person” (Simon, 2008). Reporters widely praised Obama for her effort to familiarize the American public with her husband and to portray him as an ordinary man filled with an extraordinary desire to serve his country.

Commentators also focused on Michelle Obama’s effort “to show an American family, an appealing American family, an ordinary American family—or as ordinary a family can be in which one member is running for president” (Nowicki, 2008). Scott Helman, an editorialist for *The Boston Globe*, noted Michelle Obama’s focus on her family’s narrative and the way in which her story aligns with the Democratic Party’s “broad, multicultural body politic” (Helman, 2008). Helman identified the broad thematic elements of the American Dream in the speech and the way in which Obama used her personal narrative to align with those values. There was also high praise for the moment at the conclusion of Michelle Obama’s speech when she was joined onstage by her daughters and her husband appeared behind her on a video screen (Joy, 2008; Nowicki, 2008; Simon, 2008). As one would guess, Barack Obama enjoyed his wife’s performance and spoke directly to everyone watching “Now you know why I asked her out so many times, even though she said no. You want a persistent president. Michelle, you were unbelievable and you also look very cute” (Nowicki, 2008). The moment was “emotional” as both Sasha and Malia Obama endorsed their mother’s speech and each daughter told her dad “We love you” (Simon, 2008).

Most commentators agreed that she used the speech to address the criticism she faced earlier in the campaign after the “proud of my country” remark, and there appeared to be broad consensus that she was effective at presenting a softer side. *The New York Times* said her speech clearly was intended to address the backlash her comments had drawn as she repeatedly spoke of her pride in America, and ended with the affirmation: “That is why I love this country” (Nagourney, 2008). *The Boston Globe* said Michelle Obama’s goal was “to soften her image while maintaining her authentic voice—most signs were that she did” (Helman, 2008). Kareem Crayton, a professor at USC, called the speech “well-crafted” and said it succeeded in softening the public’s image of Michelle Obama and likely dispelled any insinuations that she is some kind of a radical (“US press review,” 2008). Michelle Obama spoke directly about her husband’s vision for America’s future. She spoke directly about the values her parents instilled in her as a child and how she strives to shape her daughters into responsible, caring adults. Yet, there is a strong undercurrent in this speech of a desire to correct past mistakes, and to project to the audience an unmistakable air of patriotism.

Conclusion

Prior to March 2008, Michelle Obama’s campaign performance as well as her biography was an asset to her husband’s candidacy. Even though there was no historical model of a Black first lady for Michelle Obama to emulate and very few Black women who have ever penetrated the sphere of presidential politics, on the campaign trail she attracted large crowds, connected with audiences and was considered to be the campaign’s secret weapon (Plouffe, 2010). As a newcomer to presidential politics Michelle Obama was a captivating media figure. While there was discussion about her race, a significant amount of media attention focused on what made her relatable—her family and her marriage. However, once questions were raised about her

patriotism and her attitudes toward whites these components of her persona would be the campaign's focus for repairing her identity.

To accomplish her objectives at the Democratic National Convention Michelle Obama delivered a speech that struck a balance between conflicting ideologies. On one hand, Obama continued to echo her husband's communitarian vision of the American Dream which placed an emphasis on personal and social values. At the same time, Obama used a political feminine style which is inherently conservative to continue the work of recasting her own identity and allaying racial stereotypes. The political feminine style brought out Michelle Obama's domestic roles which worked to pacify a significant portion of American voters who were unsure about what type of first lady Michelle Obama would be. It is the political feminine style that provided her with a platform to have a discussion about what an Obama administration would offer the American people. The political feminine style gave her the authority to reclaim ownership and authorship of the American Dream. As a nurturer, mother, wife, and care giver she was in a position to identify with the struggle of other middle-class, white Americans, and more importantly, she was welcomed to assume a role in rehabilitating the Dream for those Americans who did not initially identify with her.

Finally, it is important to remember that Michelle Obama delivered a conservative address to the convention. Even though the bulk of the message sought to echo the progressive, communitarian American Dream vision of her husband, Michelle Obama built her ethos on the premise that she had retreated into the confines of her family and wanted Americans to experience the Dream as she does—from within the domestic sphere. She went to Denver to reassure the electorate that while she was campaigning for the progressive candidate, Americans need not worry about an angry, uppity Black woman living in the White House.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Michelle Obama faced an identity crisis in the midst of her husband's historic run for the Presidency, and emerged after the election as one of the most popular women on the planet (Samuels, 2008). When her husband announced his candidacy for president in February 2007, Michelle Obama was expected to be his "secret weapon" on the campaign trail, and for more than a year she fulfilled that expectation (Harnden, 2007). Michelle Obama drew large crowds at campaign events and when they appeared together, her husband would make jokes about being less popular than his wife (Plouffe, 2009). All of this changed when at two different campaign events on February 19, 2008 in Milwaukee and Madison, Wisconsin Obama stated, "For the first time in my adult life, I am really proud of my country" (Tapper, 2008). Those remarks initiated a wave of backlash from conservatives who found the remark to be offensive and wondered why the potential first lady had not felt proud of America before that day (Stephenson, 2008).

Beginning in June 2008, the Obama campaign reintroduced a softer, happier Michelle Obama to combat the innuendo and stereotypes that had called into question her patriotism. The campaign worked to reassure the electorate that Michelle Obama was patriotic, grounded, and willing to perform roles traditionally expected of a first lady. During the remainder of the summer of 2008 Michelle Obama's favorability rating steadily ticked upward—culminating in an extremely effective convention speech—an indication that the campaign's initial effort to recast her identity was successful (Newport, 2008).

Dissertation Findings

As illustrated in Chapter Two, the feminine style offers rhetorical advantages to speakers who seek to gain access and adherence within the public sphere. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell's pioneering work on the feminine style identified the form as distinct from its masculine

counterpart. Identifying the features of the feminine style provided researchers with a new framework for studying public address—most importantly a perspective that cultivated an appreciation for studying women rhetors. Bonnie Dow and Mari Tonn (1993) built upon Campbell’s work in order to identify three core features of a political feminine style which include using personal experience to support arguments, making women’s personal lives the basis of pursuing political objectives, and packaging arguments within a feminine ethic of care. As women have gained access to prominent political positions, research on the feminine style has expanded. Researchers emphasize that the feminine style has reshaped the public sphere. The form offers rhetors (and audiences) a different way of reasoning that may shift ideologies and change institutions entrenched in patriarchy. Campbell was the first researcher to fully recognize the transformative power of the feminine style—not only in the way that it could change institutions and politics, but in the way that the feminine style could change identities.

The literature review in Chapter Two on first ladies lays a foundation for exploring the ways in which Michelle Obama faced a difficult and unique rhetorical exigence during the 2008 presidential campaign. Historians have noted the evolving roles of United States ladies—from the women who were rarely seen or heard from to those women who were full partners and co-presidents. While various typologies exist for cataloguing the different types of roles that first ladies have occupied, the core duties and responsibilities of first ladies have remained consistent over time. Americans expect that this person will not neglect her duties as a wife and mother. In this way, first ladies are expected to fulfill simultaneously public and private roles. A first lady has public responsibilities and serves as a figurehead in her husband’s administration, and yet caring for her family remains her primary obligation as she lives in the White House. That is not to say that occupying the role of first lady is devoid of power and influence. Certainly, first ladies wield private, advisory power over their husbands. The president’s spouse often pursues

an agenda of her own. However, an agenda-driven first lady must not ignore her family, and it is customary for her policy initiatives to be consistent with her domestic responsibilities.

Chapter Three provided a detailed account of Michelle Obama's identity crisis and the Obama campaign's immediate response as they began to recast her identity. In addition to her "proud of my country" remarks, rumors surfaced that Michelle Obama had written a radical thesis while at Princeton and may have used derogatory language to refer to whites while speaking to a black audience in Chicago. The Obama campaign determined that these rumors and character attacks were serious enough to jeopardize her husband's chances of being in elected president. The campaign's move to combat racist stereotypes and caricatures was swift and sweeping. After scaling back her rigorous campaign schedule, Michelle Obama became noticeably less visible during the campaign for three months from April to June 2008 (Blow, 2008). In late June, Obama appeared on *The View* and on the cover of *Us Weekly*. After that, Michelle Obama's polling numbers began to improve. More importantly, the conversation about Michelle Obama began to change. Where once it was about her patriotism, racism, and exoticism, the conversation began to focus on her fashion, her workout, and her family.

Even though Michelle Obama's polling numbers began to improve once the campaign undertook efforts to recast her identity, the strategy employed for this reframing was troubling. Chapter One provided an overview of Michelle Obama's career before meeting her husband and before he began to run for national political offices. Recall from her biography that she holds a law degree from Harvard University, worked in city government as an Assistant to the Mayor of the City of Chicago, was an Assistant Dean at the University of Chicago, and a Vice President for the University of Chicago Hospitals. Yet, when the Obama campaign made the decision to recast her identity in the midst of the 2008 general election, Michelle Obama was (re)presented almost exclusively as a mother, wife and caregiver. The campaign's reaction to campaign rumor

and innuendo suggests that a determination was made that Americans are not fully comfortable with Black women occupying positions of power and/or having proximity to power. Chapter Two provided an overview of just how rarely Black women have penetrated the sphere of national political office. When Black women have played a role in presidential politics they have been the source of scandal (Sally Hemmings) and portrayed as a source of social degradation (welfare queens, Sister Souljah). Stereotypes used to scandalize and vilify Black women in the past were readily used by opponents of Michelle Obama to question her patriotism and attitudes toward whites. Additionally, this entire episode is indicative of the permanence of the nature of first ladyship. In fact, this particular case study reveals that the expectations for first ladies largely have remained unchanged over time.

Michelle Obama faced a difficult exigence as she prepared to deliver a speech to the Democratic National Convention on August 25, 2008. On one hand, she sought to deliver a conservative message—that her primary responsibility is to care for her family as first lady. Like her husband, Michelle Obama also worked to reclaim a progressive narrative of the American Dream. To do this, Obama utilized a political feminine style that served as an ideal rhetorical form to negotiate a message which contained conflicting ideologies. The political feminine style gave Obama the opportunity to make her and her family more familiar to American voters, humanize her husband, and continue her own identity makeover. Obama extrapolated from her own personal history to identify with the experience, struggle, and success of many American families. Repeatedly she emphasized the importance of family values, protecting the middle class, and creating a better future for children. Like her husband, Michelle Obama argued that the health of families is tied to the vitality of American communities. Throughout the 2008 presidential campaign both Obamas sought to redirect the course of the American Dream narrative toward an emphasis on communitarian values and strong, effective government.

Michelle Obama's speech to the 2008 Democratic National Convention was an overwhelming success and her popularity skyrocketed after its delivery.

Polling data indicates that Michelle Obama's use of the feminine style increased her popularity; however, there are two implications to this case study that are especially troubling. First, despite major breakthroughs, the feminine style often is forced on women because of resistance to seeing them as powerful. It was not an accident that Michelle Obama gave credit to Hillary Clinton in her 2008 convention address. In an effort to mend fences with Clinton supporters and gain their votes in the general election, Obama claims Clinton "put those 18 million cracks in the glass ceiling, so that our daughters—and sons—can dream a little bigger and aim a little higher" (Obama & Vander Pol, 2012, p. 86). In the context of this study it is an interesting moment. Obama is in the midst of a highly choreographed media makeover and delivering a carefully orchestrated speech in which she is purposefully using the feminine style to soften her image. The only other human being on the planet who possibly could identify with this experience is Hillary Clinton. After the Clinton administration's attempt to reform healthcare in 1993 failed—with Hillary Clinton as spearhead—she experienced a major public backlash that forced her to withdrawal from her husband's administration as a partner. To rehabilitate her image and soften her personality, the Clinton administration deployed a strategy similar to that of the Obama campaign for Michelle Obama.

In both situations, a determination was made by the Clinton administration and the Obama campaign that the first lady (and first lady-to-be) had become a political liability to their husband's political efficacy. In each case the feminine style was used as a tool to recast a powerful woman as domestic, submissive wife/mother/caregiver. It is likely that Michelle Obama's handlers had learned the lessons of Hillary Clinton, and as such, made a political

calculation early during the general election cycle to begin the process of recasting Michelle Obama's softer, more submissive identity.

When she first outlined the existence of the feminine style, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell saw the rhetorical form as a discursive formula deployed by woman to infiltrate political debates and a patriarchal public sphere that historically had excluded them. The feminine style provided a discursive platform with which women accessed credibility and power in a way that had been difficult for them to achieve in the past. Theorists who expanded on Campbell's work, like Bonnie Dow and Mari Tonn, discussed the feminine style as a tool—a weapon—that is wielded by the speaker to accomplish rhetorical objectives. However, there is a marked difference in the case of both Hillary Clinton and Michelle Obama. In these cases, the feminine style is not a tool to access power or the public sphere, but a means to deflect associations with power. The feminine style most recently has been used to escort powerful women away from full participation in the public sphere. The most troubling aspect of this is that we are presented with an illusion that these female rhetors are in control of the decision to use the feminine style in this way.

In the paragraphs above, I make a comparison between the identity crises Hillary Clinton and Michelle Obama faced as first lady (to-be), yet there are important differences between these two women. There are a unique set of constraints Michelle Obama faced as a Black woman. Earlier I discussed at length the turbulent relationship Black women have had in relation to presidential politics. The stereotypes associated with Black women in the past have been used both to attack presidents (Hemmings/Jefferson) and used by presidents for political expediency (Reagan/welfare queens). Michelle Obama is the latest victim in a long, sordid political history which marginalizes black women and reduces them to stereotypes of jezebels, welfare mothers and militant radicals.

Michelle Obama is the new archetype for what is possible for Black women in America, even while the same old stereotypes that have dogged Black women for centuries nip at her heels. As a byproduct of the struggle for civil rights in America, Black women and men have had to deal with the pressure to conform to white ideals of traditional family structure. This conflict was brought to the public's attention in the 1965 publication of Daniel Moynihan's report *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. In his report Moynihan argued that the Black American family was being undermined by female dominance (Wilson, 2009). His view was that racism against Black men in the work force caused black families to have a matriarchal structure which conflicted with the white American norm and this was the primary reason that Blacks in America were prevented from being accepted into mainstream American life (Wilson, 2009). The racist, patriarchal rationale contained within the Moynihan report continues to dog Black women in America today. Absent Black fathers receive their share of the blame for the systemic poverty facing Black families in America; however Black women are often seen as degenerate mothers incapable of maintaining a domestic environment in which a partner desires to stay (Wilson, 2009).

The treatment of Michelle Obama during the 2008 campaign for president reflects the ongoing schizophrenic relationship America has with Black femininity. Prior to her "proud of my country remarks" the media was endlessly fascinated with Michelle Obama and emanated excitement at the second-coming of Jackie Kennedy. Afterward, the media conversation turned on a dime—Obama was seen as an angry elitist who may harbor unpatriotic attitudes. When at one time news stories focused on her humble upbringing in Chicago and how her story was relatable to many average Americans, the news began to remind the public of her senior thesis on white privilege making Obama seem angry.

The poet Paul Laurence Dunbar (1993) wrote that Black Americans “wear the mask” as a way to resolve the paradox of living in a country that devalues their existence. Michelle Obama did not seem interested in wearing anyone’s mask—yet she did. In a campaign when we learned of her degrees from Princeton and Harvard, her successful careers in law and hospital administration, and her unwavering support for her husband’s presidential aspirations, we could not fully imagine her as a first lady until we were sure she was a loyal viewer of *Sex and the City*.

Michelle Obama needed to learn how to be quiet and how to be invisible. The Obama campaign pushed her to be both. In an effort to shift her personality away from militant, anti-white representations the campaign used the opportunity to recast Michelle Obama as a submissive wife who has always been a willing participant to the rules of white patriarchal family structure. The effort to dismantle racist stereotypes with a June Cleaver caricature to placate white America is reflective of the way that Black women have always faced the intersections of this paradox.

Limitations and Future Research

This dissertation examines the identity crisis Michelle Obama faced as her husband ran for president in 2008 and the strategies the campaign deployed to recast and rehabilitate her identity. Obama used the rhetorical form of the political feminine style to simultaneously deliver a conservative and progressive message. The analysis in this project showed how the form of the feminine style was ideal for Obama to negotiate the precarious exigence she faced during her husband’s first presidential campaign. As a case study, this project lays a foundation for future research of rhetors that face similar situations in forthcoming political campaigns. This project has three limitations that call for further research into this area. First, there is a lack of access to data in terms of gaining insight into the Obama campaign’s decision making strategies for

handling response to Michelle Obama's identity crisis. I am hopeful that as time passes more information will become available as to Michelle Obama's response to the various ways in which the campaign managed her identity crisis and whether she resisted the campaign's strategies to soften her image on *The View* and *Us Weekly*. From the information that is able to be gathered at this point in time, we have been permitted to know that she had a significant hand in her own convention speech, but beyond that it is difficult to tell what her response was in terms of rehabilitating and recasting her identity. It would be especially interesting to know more detail about her role in the drafting of the 2008 convention address.

Second, while Obama's unprecedented proximity to the White House as a Black woman makes her an important figure to study; further work needs to be done to investigate the barriers faced by future first ladies of color and how their rhetoric will work to overcome difficult exigencies. Michelle Obama's experience may be unique to her as a candidate's spouse, and it may turn out that future first ladies of color face less resistance now that a Black woman has lived in the White House. One wonders if a woman of color with less education, less professional experience, and a less tumultuous relationship with those in the opposing political party would face as much resistance as a potential first lady. Will minority women in the future with backgrounds similar to Michelle Obama necessarily undergo identity makeovers to appear more electable to American voters? Michelle Obama's path in the 2008 presidential campaign provides a template for similar women in the future, and the question remains as to whether those women will need to follow the Obama model. Or, (like Jackie Robinson for Black baseball players) has Michelle Obama created a path of less resistance for women of color to be themselves in presidential elections? There is a need for additional case studies.

The third limitation and avenue for potential future research is to consider whether the feminine style is similarly constraining to women in situations not as strongly tied to traditional

gender roles as the first ladyship. In this dissertation I argued that for Michelle Obama the feminine style was deployed in a conservative framework that limited her in terms of what she was able to say about herself. More work needs to be done to explore whether the feminine style is essentially imposed on all first ladies. At the same time, women in less clearly gendered roles, such as Senator, Governor, Representative, and so forth may have more freedom to move back and forth between traditionally feminine and traditionally masculine styles. It is also possible that in other contexts, such as the Congress, the feminine style, rather than acting as a conservative force, may allow female legislators to forcefully argue for progressive policy goals focused on the American family.

This project reveals that there is a synergistic relationship between the use of the feminine style and the American Dream myth. The final major limitation of this study is that this project has focused on one case study, and exploring other rhetors will mature our understanding of how the form of the feminine style work as a vehicle for delivering various narrative visions of the American Dream narrative. There is a large reservoir of examples of speakers who utilize the feminine style and an equally large number of rhetors who deploy a trajectory of the American Dream narrative to accomplish their objectives. Researchers should look carefully at past case studies to uncover situations in which the feminine style and the American Dream have intersected. Also, this analysis should be extended into the 2012 election cycle to examine Michelle Obama's continued utilization of the political feminine style during her husband's campaign for reelection. Researchers might investigate the extent to which it was necessary for her to articulate a feminine ethic of care and for the campaign to portray her solely as a wife, mother, and caregiver as it had in 2008. The research in this project provides a foundation for exploring Barack Obama's reelection in 2012 and the rhetoric of Michelle Obama during that campaign.

Conclusion

There is a good chance that Michelle Obama will have an active political life after her husband's presidency. Whether she pursues elected office on her own or becomes a private citizen who campaigns for others remains to be seen. However, it is likely that Michelle Obama will be a major political force for the remainder of her life. The analysis in this dissertation is a record of her experiences as she first entered the national public spotlight. Her experiences during the 2008 presidential campaign forever will shape her discourse in front of a national audience. Thus, this record provides a necessary background for continuing a scholarly conversation about Michelle Obama in the future.

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