

White House, Black Mother: Michelle Obama and the Politics of Motherhood as First Lady

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In 2008, for the first time in the history of this country, a black woman became First Lady of the United States. During Barack Obama's presidency, Michelle Obama was ever present in the public eye for her advocacy on issues related to health, military families, education, and for promoting the interests of women and girls. This article contributes to ongoing scholarly discourse, as well as extensive media coverage and analysis, regarding Obama's role as wife and first lady by critically examining how the particular model of motherhood she embraced and

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exhibited, a model firmly rooted in the black American community, was designed to challenge negative stereotypes of black women, maternity, and families. We address the following questions in this work: How did Obama's identity as a black woman influence the policies she championed as first lady? Does Obama's mothering relate to stereotypes of black mothers and help (re)define black motherhood, and if so, how? What does it mean to be a black *mater gentis* or mother of the nation? Drawing on her speeches and policy initiatives, we reveal how Michelle Obama defied dominant and oppressive stereotypes of black women and mothers while simultaneously (re)defining black womanhood and motherhood for the nation.

Keywords: Michelle Obama, motherhood, stereotype

From the beginning of her tenure as first lady, Michelle Obama was fully aware that many Americans had not been exposed to the meaning and themes of motherhood in black culture, although they would likely be quite familiar with the long-standing stereotypes and misrepresentations of black women and mothers in society promulgated in public discourse (Hancock 2004; Harris-Perry 2011; Lubiano 1992; Moynihan 1965). Consciously or subconsciously, in her role as first lady, Obama made the institution of black motherhood more transparent to those living in the United States and around the world. In doing so, she defied the long-standing dominant and oppressive stereotypes of black women and mothers while simultaneously redefining black motherhood and black families on the nation's most public stage.

Our article complements research on Michelle Obama by building upon existing scholarship on Michelle Obama's identity as a black woman, her performance of maternity, and the advocacy work that became her platform during her tenure as first lady. We examine Obama's role as a black mother using the framework outlined in Patricia Hill Collins' "Afrocentric Feminist Analysis of Black Motherhood." We also consider what it meant for Obama, as a black woman, to take on the responsibility of *mater gentis* — a term we use to characterize the role and obligations of a first lady in her capacity as mother of the nation — by offering a macro-level analysis of "the politics of mothering." Our analysis of some of Obama's most popular policy initiatives reveals that her persona and mothering style defied and challenged long-standing stereotypes of black women and mothers. In a further examination of her policy initiatives, we argue that public perceptions of Obama's role as the "mother of the nation" were connected to the policies she chose to advance. We complement our analysis of the policies Obama advocated for and implemented with speeches and interviews, which allow us to present a more comprehensive evaluation of the factors that defined her momentous tenure.

THE FIRST LADY AND STEREOTYPES OF BLACK WOMEN AND MOTHERS

The literature points to the importance of examining public perceptions of Obama within the history and current realities of the stigmatization of black women (Brown 2012; Hayden 2017; Lugo-Lugo and Bloodsworth-Lugo 2011; Williams 2008). Perceptions of first lady Michelle Obama were deeply steeped within the context of the four dominant and oppressive stereotypes of black women in the United States: mammy, matriarch, welfare queen, and sexual siren (Bobo 1995; Collins 2000). As Lugo-Lugo and Bloodsworth-Lugo argue, “[U]nderstandings of race [and racial stereotypes] mediate and inform ways in which US society conceives of and explains the Obamas, both as individuals and as a family” (2011, 207). These stereotypes are all a product of white supremacy and its connection to the patriarchal oppression of black womanhood since slavery. Challenging these controlling images has long been a core theme in black feminist thought (Collins 2000). Given that it is difficult for people to accept and respect those whom they view negatively, we submit that Obama increased the effectiveness of her messaging by countering these oppressive and controlling images through both her intentional presentation of self and her unrelenting work to ensure that she and other black women would be viewed more accurately.

As Collins (2015) contends, “The first controlling image applied to US black women is that of the mammy — the faithful, obedient domestic servant” (72). The mammy figure is typically presented as an older woman who is heavier-set, has a dark complexion, and minimizes the needs of her family to be the loyal servant of the needs of her “superiors.” Although Obama did position herself as the “mom-in-chief” through demonstrating her passion for the well-being of all the children and families of the nation, she also countered this stereotype image by being fiercely protective of her children and family (Brown, 2012). “In placing the well-being of her own (black) children ahead of the interests of her adopted white family (that is, the country), Michelle Obama revealed herself as no submissive first-lady-to-be, and certainly as no self-sacrificing black woman” (Lugo-Lugo and Bloodsworth-Lugo 2011, 210). She further actively worked to dispel the overweight image of black women through her “Let’s Move!” fitness campaign, but perhaps most importantly, through her self-presentation as a healthy, fit woman: her body was often a focal point of attention. Her “right to bare arms”

became a point of discussion throughout her tenure as first lady (Ibanga 2009), and she was criticized on numerous occasions for exposing her arms when she wore sleeveless dresses, which was further a direct attempt to paint her as hypersexualized Jezebel as opposed to a respectable “lady.”¹

Michelle Obama also effectively challenged the stereotype of black women as welfare queens. Although a wealth of evidence exists that dispels the myth of the black welfare queen, the stereotype is pervasive in public discourse and continues to influence US policy making as well as white Americans’ public opinion and attitudes toward poverty and welfare spending (DeSante 2013; Gilens 2009; Hancock 2004). The stereotype of the welfare queen is particularly pernicious because it places the blame of the nation’s socioeconomic deterioration on black women: “‘Welfare queen’ is a phrase that describes economic dependency — the lack of a job and/or income... The welfare queen represents moral aberration and an economic drain, but the figure’s problematic status becomes all the more threatening once responsibility for the destruction of the American way of life is attributed to it” (Lubiano 1992, 337–38). As the only first lady in history with two Ivy League degrees, Obama’s educational attainment contrasts sharply with the image of the black welfare queen as uneducated and lazy. Moreover, having worked in the corporate world as an attorney, and later in important administrative positions at both the University of Chicago and the University of Chicago Medical Center, Obama effectively challenged these negative stereotypes that are often ascribed to black women.

The stereotype of the welfare queen contrasts with the perception of black women as demanding matriarchs who are unable to either raise children properly or keep men by their sides. These black women are portrayed as “overly aggressive, unfeminine women...[who] allegedly emasculated their lovers and husbands” (Collins 2000, 75). The image of black women as matriarchs becomes that of the overbearing, shrewish nonwoman, who pushes away the men in her life and whose poor values are to blame for her children’s failures. In a number of ways, Michelle Obama defied this stereotype. Although many people lauded her marriage to Barack Obama and acknowledged that she was a good mother to her daughters Malia and Sasha, she still faced immense

1. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/09/28/michelle-obama-look-like-a-first-lady-bobbie-lussier_n_1922236.html and <https://abcnews.go.com/GMA/story?id=6986019&page=1>. For an in-depth examination of Michelle Obama in the context of the hypersexualized “Jezebel” stereotype, see Harris-Perry (2011).

public scrutiny. More specifically, as is evident from her 2008 Democratic National Convention speech (discussed later in this article) and her recently published memoir *Becoming* (2018a), she repeatedly referenced her own (family's) belief in, and experience with, the concepts of hard work and the American dream. She further stated that she was perceived as a "disappointment to feminists" given that "[s]everal months before Barack was elected, [she'd] told a magazine interviewer that [her] primary focus in the White House would be to continue [her] role as 'mom in chief' in our family" (Obama 2018a, 328–329). She also realized that she was "being watched... especially by professional working women, who wondered whether [she'd] bury [her] education and management experience to fold [herself] into some prescribed First Lady pigeonhole, a place lined with tea leaves and pink linen. People seemed worried that [she] wasn't going to show [her] full self" (Obama 2018a, 328). Rather than appearing "overly aggressive," she was discredited for her dedication to her partner and her children.

Nevertheless, of the many stereotypes that exist as controlling images in the public psyche, "the matriarch" or "angry black woman" is perhaps the one to which Michelle Obama was most often subjected because of her own esteemed legal career. As White (2011) contends, "Obama's most consistent negative media portrayal relied on the black female archetype of 'the Bitch.' For Obama, racially charged terms like 'angry' and 'bitter' were often used to describe her 'whining' about social injustice on the campaign trail" (12). Public discourse emphasized her work and status in the legal world and established the notion that she had her own "independent mind" (Kornblut 2009; Lightfoot 2009). Even self-proclaimed feminists like *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd stated, "Usually, I love the dynamics of a cheeky woman puncturing the ego of a cocky guy... So why don't I like it with Michelle and Barack? I wince a bit when Michelle Obama chides her husband as a mere mortal — a comic routine that rests on the presumption that we see him as a god" (Dowd 2007). Ironically, white feminists (who often critiqued society's surveillance of women's language) constantly policed Obama's rhetoric.

Obama was well aware that she was perceived as an angry black woman, and in her memoir, she shared some of the implications and dangers of such a stereotype. "I was female, black, and strong, which to certain people ... translated only to 'angry.'" (Obama 2018a, 265). She describes having to be mindful of her own reactions when called an angry black woman and how she had to work closely with speechwriters and

campaign officials to avoid being fed to “the public as some sort of pissed-off harpy” because, “[t]he easiest way to disregard a woman’s voice is to package her as a scold” (Obama 2018a, 267). Ultimately, according to Obama, since being reluctantly thrust in the public eye, she has had to fight being “taken down as an angry black woman,” and she often questions which part of the phrase matters most to her critics: “is it ‘angry’ or ‘black’ or ‘woman’?” (Obama 2018a, x). In sum, it is clear that the American public and many political elites imagined Obama within the context of the four dominant stereotypes of black women, and she defied each of them through her intentional presentation of self.²

AFROCENTRIC IDEOLOGY OF MOTHERHOOD

Before delving into a detailed examination of the important policy initiatives that defined Michelle Obama’s role as first lady and mother of the nation, we offer an Afrocentric theoretical perspective on black motherhood to explain the ways in which Obama’s identity as a black woman directly influenced her outlook on mothering. The most radical strategies that Michelle Obama employed for confronting stereotypes are, perhaps, her personal approaches to motherhood. Black motherhood has always been judged by the standards of the dominant Eurocentric ideology of motherhood. As such, “motherhood in the United States is intersectional in nature and highly racialized” (Carew 2019, 144; Collins 2005; Roberts 1993; Rosenthal and Lobel 2016).³ Black attitudes toward, perspectives on, and ways of mothering arose in resistance to enslavement, racial oppression, and misogyny. That is, black women in the United States have mothered differently than white women to ensure the survival of their own. Rather than emulating white motherhood, black womanhood and mothering are grounded in, and informed by, African traditions of community-based child rearing and care: “[B]lack motherhood consists of a series of constantly renegotiated relationships that African-American women experience with one another, with black children, with the larger African-American community, and with self” (Collins 2005, 152). In contrast to the white family, the primary black

2. For more evaluation of Michelle Obama’s balancing act across the stereotypes that are frequently attributed to black women, see Gillespie (2016).

3. A significant body of literature examines the importance of understanding how the intersection of race and gender influences perceptions of identity, experiences, and goals within the context of politics. For example, see Brown and Gershon (2016); Cohen (2003); Crenshaw (1991); Jordan-Zachery (2007); and Simien and Clawson (2004).

family unit includes not only the nuclear family but also a collection of individuals who work to keep the family and community intact. Further, this different conceptualization of motherhood has direct implications for the ways in which black American women engage in activism, and even the ways they develop their rhetoric and “perform maternity” to strengthen and protect their families and communities (Boris 1989; Carew 2019; Hayden 2017; Kahl 2009;). Indeed, as black mothers from the past and present show, for generations (e.g., Ida B. Wells), being a mother has inspired and propelled black women to engage in activism that benefits both the immediate family and the broader black community (Harris 1991, 10).

Although biological mothers may be present, or even absent, in the black *ménage*, child rearing is a collaboration between biological parents and community members. “By seeing the larger community as responsible for children and by giving othermothers and other nonparents ‘rights’ in child rearing, African-Americans challenge prevailing property relations. [T]raditional bloodmother/othermother relationships in women-centered networks are “revolutionary” (Collins 2005, 156). Othermothers are “. . . women who assist bloodmothers [or biological mothers] by sharing mothering responsibilities — traditionally [othermothers] have been central to the institution of Black motherhood” (Collins 2005, 152). This Afrocentric conceptualization of mothering was evident in Michelle Obama’s own life: her mother, Marian Shields Robinson, assisted Michelle in the upbringing of Malia and Sasha when the family was living in the White House. Michelle Obama’s decision to invite her mother to live with her family the entire time they were in the White House and provide child care assistance for her daughters is a clear example of the “women-centered networks of bloodmothers,” which distinguishes black mothering from Eurocentric mothering (Obama 2018a).

To better understand Mrs. Robinson’s role in the White House, we turn to Obama’s memoir. “My mother hadn’t wanted to come with us to Washington, but I’d forced the issue. The girls needed her. I needed her. . . For the last few years, she’d been a nearly every-day presence in our lives, her practicality a salve to everyone’s worries” (Obama 2018a, 295). Obama described her mother’s sacrifice and what her presence meant for her own peace: “[h]er boundless love for my girls, and her willingness to put our needs before her own, gave me the comfort and confidence to venture out into the world knowing they were safe and cherished at home” (Obama 2018a, 423). This sacrifice and

'othermothering' that Obama discusses demonstrates that she was not at all territorial or threatened by her own mother playing a major role in the upbringing of Malia and Sasha. Moreover, the 'othermothering' that Obama encouraged and facilitated echoes the behaviors and sentiments shared by many black families who reveal the unique role black grandmothers play in helping raise their grandchildren.

But mothering by black grandmothers is not the same across and within all black families. Even though Robinson and Obama normalize their family model in the White House, their Afrocentric approach to mothering is revolutionary. As bell hooks (2000) contends, "This form of parenting. . . takes place in opposition to the idea that parents, especially mothers, should be the only childbearers. . . This kind of shared responsibility for child care can happen in small community settings where people know and trust one another. It cannot happen in those settings if parents regard children as their 'property,' their possession" (144–45). In effect, Malia and Sasha were entrusted to "othermothers" employed by the Obamas. Obama (2018a) discusses the critical role played by these women she affectionately called "big sisters" to her girls: "The Kristins,' as we called them, stood in for us often. They served as liaisons between our family. . . setting up meetings and interacting with teachers, coaches, and other parents when Barack and I weren't able. With the girls, they were protective, loving, and far hipper than I'd ever be in the eyes of my kids" (394). Obama embraced the presence and concept of 'othermothering,' not only in her children's lives but also in her entire approach to her role as "mom in chief" as a first lady who would encourage the nation as a whole to work to take a community-minded view of caring for the nation's children (King 2010). Again, this othermothering is firmly rooted in the Afrocentric approach to mothering and raising children.

THE POLITICS OF MOTHERING

As first lady, Michelle Obama implemented policy initiatives and programs focused on promoting education, healthcare and wellness, and providing support for service members and their families. Her policies were influenced greatly by her own perceptions of herself as "mother of the nation." Following the inauguration of president Barack Obama, Michelle Obama began characterizing herself as the "mom in chief." She described herself first and foremost as a mother to Malia and Sasha

and was clear that her priority was to make sure that her young daughters settled happily and adjusted to their highly scrutinized life in the White House. After all, the first lady was well aware that Malia and Sasha were the first black daughters to reside in the White House. Collins (1991) argues, “African-American mothers place a strong emphasis on protection, either by trying to shield their daughters as long as possible from the penalties attached to their race, class, gender, status or by teaching them skills of independence and self-reliance so that they will be able to protect themselves” (126). Michelle Obama affirmed: “Is there anything more powerful than a mom?” (Doll 2012).

The first lady’s charismatic personality and her widespread popularity and political appeal set the stage as she played a central role in her husband’s administration by directly influencing policy from the outset (Givhan 2010). Her aversion to politics and her reluctance to participate in fundraising activities was well known, much to the chagrin of Democratic leaders who viewed her as an invaluable asset for drawing in donors and voters (Dovere 2014). Her cautious embrace of her new role as first lady was highly criticized. The media characterized her as “absent,” and she was labeled as a “feminist nightmare” for “evangelizing exercise and good eating habits,” and failing to focus more on policy and politics (Cottle 2013; Neath 2014; Steinhauer 2013). Some white feminists expressed negative reactions to Obama’s decision to prioritize motherhood, which is part of a broader critique of prevailing ideologies that suggest that maternity is the primary and most important role that a woman should play (Hayden 2017, 12). Black feminists were quick to reject this type of criticism targeting Obama, pointing to the “progressive potential” of her persona and emphasizing that black women need to actively challenge oppressive stereotypes that suggest that the primary purpose in a black woman’s life is to reproduce (Hayden 2017, 12). Explains Collins (2005): “Black motherhood as an institution is both dynamic and dialectical. An ongoing tension exists between efforts to mold the institution of Black motherhood to benefit systems of race, gender, and class oppression and efforts by African-American women to define and value our own experiences with motherhood” (152). In spite of the censure on this front, Michelle Obama worked relentlessly toward her goals of supporting the campaigns and protecting her family, to the point that more than one-quarter of the news profiles on her portrayed her as a campaign surrogate and as a mother (Gillespie 2016). She engaged in motherhood on her own terms, and in so doing, resisted oppressive ideologies in ways that she felt positively affected her family and her husband’s campaign and presidency.

Positive images of black women are largely absent in public discourse, and by prioritizing motherhood, Obama was able to transform the public's views about black motherhood while simultaneously challenging the perception that the first lady can only be a middle- to upper-class white woman (Hayden 2017, 12). As Parry-Giles and Blair (2002) explain, “the first lady pulpit can act as a site for the performance of archetypal femininity; it can also function as a location of feminist advancement that challenges gender stereotypes, [thereby] expanding women's political space” (567). Undoubtedly, Michelle Obama successfully navigated the terrain of the White House while presenting a powerfully constructive image of black women.⁴

MATER GENTIS: MOTHERING AND LEADERSHIP ON THE NATIONAL STAGE

By virtue of their public persona, first ladies have “extended the nineteenth-century ideology of republican motherhood” (Parry-Giles and Blair 2002, 565). In the nineteenth century, an ideological conceptualization of “the republican mother” emerged that portrayed the ideal woman as one who was “pious, pure, submissive, domestic, and ‘naturally religious’” (Parry-Giles and Blair 2002, 573). Political leaders believed that women's education was important because educated women would raise respectable republican sons (Nash 1997). On a national stage, being a virtuous first lady involved focusing on “hailing, modeling, and promoting publicly” civic values, norms, and ideals (Parry-Giles and Blair 2002, 576). In this regard, “the First Lady personifies domesticity and traditional womanhood” (Williams 2008, 835).

Similar claims about black motherhood, tied to philosophies of black respectability, had long been articulated by some of the most influential thinkers in the black American community, including Nannie Helen Burroughs, Anna Julia Cooper, Mary Church Terrell, Ida B. Wells, and Lucy Slowe Diggs. These ideas about what it meant for black women to be responsible citizens along with good wives and mothers became a cornerstone of the ideology of “racial uplift” in the black community (Mullane 1993; Robnett 1997). This ideology — that educated blacks were responsible for the welfare, collective social advancement, and moral guidance of all African Americans — combatted negative racial

4. She had high popularity ratings and was generally well liked during her time in the White House (Badas and Stauffer 2019; McThomas and Tesler 2016; Zulli 2018).

stereotypes but often disseminated problematic views on gender and class differences among blacks. Higginbotham (1992) explains how, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a rallying notion of “racial uplift” took root in the black community and directly influenced the ways in which black women viewed themselves as individuals, their roles as mothers, and their status within American society. She contends that the notion of racial uplift was problematic because it equated “normality to white middle class models of gender roles,” while seeking to invoke “a discursive ground on which to explode negative stereotypes of black women” (Higginbotham 1992, 271).⁵

Many politically active black women embraced the politics of respectability. As black women developed their own distinct political culture, the politics of respectability, as it related specifically to a “politics of appearance” and their public political behavior, became even more significant (Lindsey 2017). Performing respectability politics in this way was an effective approach that black women could use to attain greater visibility in the sociopolitical arena, while simultaneously dispelling myths about their character and level of political sophistication (Lindsey 2017). Through Obama’s role as first lady and *mater gentis* (mother of the nation), we see the connection between republican motherhood and black respectability politics. The primary concern of a *mater gentis* is the health, well-being, and moral fortitude of the nation’s children. Consequently, the role of mother, as performed by many contemporary first ladies, led them to publicly focus on important social issues and to become outspoken advocates of children, politicking on their behalf, in the United States and other parts of the world (Parry-Giles and Blair 2002). Next, we turn to a macro-level analysis that highlights the policy initiatives Obama advanced during her tenure as first lady and mother of the nation.

POLICY IMPLEMENTATION: KEY INITIATIVES

The policies and initiatives that Michelle Obama focused on as first lady stemmed from her views regarding the importance of her role as a

5. The National Association of Colored Women [NACW] was founded in 1896 and developed the motto of “Lifting as We Climb” as direction for how to engage in improving the social, economic, and political conditions of black Americans. Among the many strategies used within this movement, the leaders of NACW used a class-based lens of what we now call respectability politics to attempt to ensure that people with few resources would find ways to attempt to defy stereotypes. For more in-depth examinations, see Gillespie (2016); Harris-Perry (2011); Mullane (1993); and Robnett (1997).

mother, which extended to her desire to act in that same capacity as *mater gentis*. Her initiatives can further be understood within the long history of black women's political activism: "While Black women. . . [in politics]. . . rarely forwarded an agenda designed exclusively for Black women, the types of issues they championed and the way in which they operated. . . suggests that they brought an Afrocentric feminist sensibility to their political activism" (Collins 1991, 157). Nonetheless, she recognized that whatever initiatives she undertook, she needed to "leave the politics to Barack and focus [her] own efforts elsewhere," and be careful not to "come off as a finger-wagging embodiment of the nanny state" (Obama 2018a, 336). Here, we focus on three key initiatives that Obama championed as first lady, which we argue were purposeful and lasting: health and fitness, support for military families, and education — specifically, programs on higher education and international adolescent girl education.

Healthy Families

Obama's first effort was the garden she planted at the White House. The garden and her general desire to help American families become healthier complemented Barack's work on health care. It also provided an opportunity for her to work with local children: "[She knelt with] a bunch of fifth graders as [they] carefully put seedlings into the ground, patting the dirt into place around the fragile stalks" (Obama 2018a, 321). This garden project was the predecessor to Obama's first major campaign *Let's Move!*, which was a public health initiative focused on healthy eating and fitness. This campaign enabled the first lady to directly challenge a long-standing characterization of black women "as overweight mummies, medically obese, and fat accepting" (Purkiss 2017b). Further complicating this problematic stereotype of black women was the fact that by the turn of the twentieth century, Americans had begun to associate fitness, slimness, and a general concern with healthy living with "patriotism" and "trustworthiness" (Purkiss 2017a, 15). Black women were, by extension, viewed as unpatriotic and less deserving of the rights of citizenship. The mainstream literature of the time portrayed white women as embodying the most acceptable version of femininity and wholly disregarded the efforts of black women who were also promoting exercise and healthy eating (Purkiss 2017a). Obama also directly engaged the value of "othermothering" through this

initiative by focusing on developing a plan for creating a nurturing environment for the children and families of the nation (King 2010).

We frame our understanding of Obama's policy choices in terms of how she viewed these issues as a black woman and as a mother who was concerned for the well-being of her own children and all of America's children. Her passion for fitness was emblematic of the long tradition of black women's participation in the physical culture movement, which challenged widely held assumptions about black Americans' aesthetic values and its connection to citizenship (Purkiss, 2017a, 16). That is, black women's participation in the physical culture movement was a political statement and a way to claim their rightful place in the nation as legitimate citizens.

Joining Forces: Initiative for Service Members and their Families

Historically, first ladies have also used their platforms to support service members, veterans, and their families (McBride 2017). Her outlook on mothering and her desire to build and maintain strong family networks extended to her advocacy efforts on behalf of military families. During her first trip outside of Washington, she highlighted the problems that US service members and their families continually face (Kahl 2009). She notes, "Our soldiers and their families have done their duty and they do it without complaint. And we as a grateful nation must do ours and do everything in our power to honor them by supporting them" (Obama 2009).

Obama's outreach to the military had important political implications. To begin, it helped dispel the perception of Democrats as being antimilitary. Her advocacy further increased her favorability ratings among Americans, including members of the military (HuffPost 2011; Walsh 2009). As Sean O'Keefe, the former Navy secretary and NASA administrator remarked, "[Michelle] Obama has raised the visibility of the challenges confronted by the families of military service members" (HuffPost 2011). In 2011, Michelle Obama and Jill Biden worked together to launch an initiative called "Joining Forces," an initiative whose primary goal was to serve the military and their families. Obama knew that, like the healthy families initiative, this initiative would "serve to support Barack's duties as commander in chief" (Obama 2018a, 248).

Obama's military advocacy was also defined by her identity as a black woman. Racial minorities are more likely to choose military service than

their white counterparts. Many black Americans, especially black American women, “see the military as a meritocratic institution that offers them greater opportunity than they would find in higher education or the civilian labor market” (Clever and Segal 2013, 18). As a black woman, Obama was empathetic to struggles faced by black military families, perhaps because she was well aware that “Black and female veterans are less likely to receive benefits” (Hosek and Wadsworth 2013, 53). Although advocacy for military families is not traditionally seen as assisting black families, Obama’s initiatives undoubtedly benefited black military families. Here, we see Obama acting as an ‘othermother’ and using her position for the betterment of her community: “The institution of Black motherhood consists of a series of constantly renegotiated relationships that African-American women experience with... the larger African-American community... These relations occur in specific locations such as the individual households... as well as in Black community institutions (Collins 2005, 151–52).”

Education

Historically, black women in the United States were the “first of their group to have educational opportunit[ies], [and] they were charged, not only with making use of those opportunities, but also with extending them” (Royster 2000, 178). Black women recognized and understood the value of education as a “sacred trust,” which they had the burden of carrying (Royster 2000, 178). “[The] belief in education for race uplift and in the special role of Black women in this struggle” emerged at the end of the Civil War (Collins 1991, 149). “Working for race uplift and education became intertwined” (Collins 1991, 149). Michelle Obama’s implementation of several educational initiatives as first lady bears witness to this long-standing tradition among black American women to extend the sacred trust of education to others. Aside from actively encouraging young people to continue their education beyond high school, Obama spearheaded the “Reach Higher” initiative in 2014. The program’s objective is to inspire young people to take control of their future. The emphasis on tertiary, or postsecondary, education involves encouraging students to attend either professional training programs, community college, or obtain a degree from a four-year college or university.

In 2015, President Barack and Michelle Obama launched “Let Girls Learn,” a government-wide initiative that supports education for girls

around the world. “Let Girls Learn” educates and empowers adolescent girls and young women by addressing issues — including cultural, financial, social, and physical barriers — that are foundational to the education of girls. In her farewell speech as first lady, Michelle Obama made an emotional plea to the youth: “Be hopeful. Be empowered. Empower yourself with a good education... then build a country worthy of your boundless promise” (Taylor 2017). In this case, we see the First Lady’s concern with the education of girls like her own daughters (Obama 2018b). Collins (2000) suggests that education helps black girls and women enhance their positive self-definition. Without a doubt, Michelle Obama distinguished herself as an advocate, or from an Afrocentric perspective, an “othermother” for children everywhere (Obama 2018b).

UNVEILING THE INSTITUTION OF BLACK MOTHERHOOD THROUGH OBAMA’S RHETORIC

We now examine Obama’s mothering through her rhetoric. We conducted a close read of three of her most widely known speeches, her 2008, 2012, and 2016 Democratic National Convention (DNC) addresses. In her memoir, Obama (2018a) writes that “I worried that many Americans wouldn’t see themselves reflected in me, or that they wouldn’t relate to my journey” (284). Accordingly, she used her DNC speeches as a way to tell her narrative and help people relate to her journey. In addition to providing this information that was necessary for Obama’s electability, we submit that these speeches are a key site for examining and analyzing how she (re)defined black motherhood. Obama confronted the negative stereotypes of black women in her speeches, and in doing so, demonstrated how they were not applicable to her, her family, or other black mothers and families. She did so by example, rather than explicitly discussing these stereotypes in her speeches.

One of the first speeches that put Michelle Obama on the national stage was in 2008 at the height of Barack’s presidential campaign in Denver, Colorado. During the first night of the 2008 Democratic National Convention, Michelle Obama addressed the audience, expressing why she believed Barack Obama was the best candidate to become the 44th president. She knew that as a black man, Barack Obama was unknown to much of the American electorate and that his racial identity and citizenship were being questioned mainly by the far-Right birther

movement. Furthermore, in the public eye, questions emerged “in the public imaginary about his patriotism, his ‘Muslim name,’ and his religious affiliations” (Bloodsworth-Lugo and Lugo-Lugo 2010, 79). Thus, her speech needed to both humanize and lionize him and, in a way, Americanize him. In her speech, Obama countered the notion that black families are dysfunctional, representing a united black family structure in front of a predominantly white electorate. Additionally, she effectively defied the stereotype of black women as agents that emasculate black men: “In woman-centered kin units . . . the centrality of mothers is not predicated on male powerlessness” (Collins 2005, 153). She reiterates her support for her partner and their marriage in her 2012 speech: “And the truth is, I loved the life we had built for our girls . . . I deeply loved the man I had built that life with . . . and I didn’t want that to change if he became President.” Here again, this kind of relationship portrayed at the national level runs contrary to beliefs about black women who devalue and humiliate their husbands. On the contrary, Michelle Obama consistently expressed her unfailing support of Barack (Obama 2018a).

Although each of Obama’s DNC speeches had a different focus, a common theme connects them. Obama highlighted important aspects of the institution of black motherhood and black family culture and challenged negative stereotypes about black mothers and women. In 2008, when she introduced herself formally to the nation, she did so as a wife and mother, saying, “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” (Obama 2008). Moreover, she was transparent about how even routine parenting activities were very important to her; she was not just a biological mother in name, but she was a full-time mother and did simple things like putting her children to bed and taking her children to their soccer games on the weekends. “[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” (Obama 2008). Like many women who have a strong desire to protect their children, Obama constantly thought about their well-being as she made decisions that might affect their lives (Elliot, Powell, and Brenton 2015; Obama 2018a). And this is, of course, consistent with what we have especially seen from black women fighting fiercely to protect their children and communities from state-sponsored violence (Taylor 2016).

Above all else, Obama viewed motherhood as her most important responsibility, as she disclosed in the closing statement of her 2012 DNC speech: “I say all of this tonight not just as First Lady. . . and not just as a wife. You see, at the end of the day, my most important title is still ‘mom-in-chief’. . . My daughters are still the heart of my heart and the center of my world” (Obama 2012). Her DNC speeches also revealed her willingness and excitement to become an “othermother” to the nation’s children. Although some might misread and misconstrue Obama as reifying the Mammy stereotype given her interest in the nation’s children, we contend that her consideration of the nation’s children and her sensibility beyond her own biological children is in line with the “othermother” role many black women play for children they love and see themselves in community with (Collins 2005; King 2010). As noted in her 2008 DNC speech, as *mater gentis*, she was specifically thinking about the well-being of all of the nations’ children:

[My daughters’] future — and all our children’s future — is my stake in this election. . . Because we 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 2008).

Obama’s speeches further countered perceptions that black women are lazy, uneducated, unemployed, welfare recipients. Although scholars have long known that most Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) recipients are white, black women are often portrayed as the primary recipients of welfare (Gilens 2009). They are also viewed by many Americans as being less deserving of this type of government support as compared to white women (DeSante 2013). In her 2008 and 2012 DNC speeches, Obama defied the stereotype of the welfare recipient by highlighting her own educational background and the fact that she attended college. In her 2008 speech, she also focused on her own career and professional trajectory, describing how she had left a law practice to enter into public service: “I’ve tried to give back to this country that has given me so much. That’s why I left a job at a law firm for a career in public service.” Although employment and educational background do not disqualify individuals from receiving social services like welfare, Obama was deliberate about using her platform to directly challenge widely held misperceptions among many Americans that black women and mothers are lazy and uneducated.

Another stereotype that Obama defied on the DNC stage was that of the “angry black woman.” In all three DNC speeches — 2008, 2012,

and 2016 — Obama does not mention racism or racial oppression, or how being black in America influenced her childhood or her adulthood. We agree with scholars who contend that both Barack and Michelle Obama's decision to not talk directly about race and racism on the campaign trail was a political strategy designed to win over white voters by deracializing Barack Obama and portraying him as transcending race (Carter and Dowe 2015; Gillespie 2010). Rather than mentioning race, she focused on individualism and the ability of all Americans, "no matter who we are, or where we're from, or what we look like, or who we love" to have the same opportunities in life (Obama 2012). Moreover, she noted that her family "didn't begrudge anyone else's success or care that others had much more than they did . . . in fact, they admired it. . . They simply believed in that fundamental American promise that, even if you don't start out with much, if you work hard and do what you're supposed to do, then you should be able to build a decent life for yourself and an even better life for your kids and grandkids" (Obama 2012). Not only did she not appear hostile or "angry" when it came to challenging systems of oppression, but she was also deliberate about encouraging individuals to strive for the American dream in spite of any obstacles they face.

Beyond challenging the dominant stereotypes of black women, Obama strove to situate her family as fully American by addressing her family's support for the American dream and American values. By focusing her comments on these specific areas, Obama simultaneously managed to introduce her husband and family to the nation as unequivocally American. In fact, in her memoir, she mentions that in her speeches, she emphasized that she and Barack were truly American, and how they lived a life that related to the lives of so many Americans, especially the folks who would be voting in November (Obama 2018a). "[K]nowing that maybe [she'd] done something, finally, to change people's perception of [her]" brought her "a powerful blast of relief" (Obama 2018a, 271). By demonstrating that they had created a typical "American" family, she was able to garner support for her family and her husband's candidacy.

THE FIRST LADY ON BLACK MOTHERHOOD AND BLACK FATHERS

In public discourse, black motherhood is often discussed without specific reference to the role of men, and this can lead to misguided perceptions

that black women remain unwed and they have children with men who do not play an active role as fathers in the lives of their children (Collins 2005; Moynihan 1965). This myopic view of black motherhood, unfortunately, misrepresents and renders invisible the reality of many black families in the United States. From Michelle Obama's very first DNC speech, we learn that she grew up in a nuclear family household with defined gender roles: her father worked outside the home while her mother worked as a stay-at-home wife and mother. She described her family as a functional, hard-working family that, like so many black families, were willing to sacrifice for their children's future: "thanks to their faith and hard work, [both she and her brother, Craig] were able to go on to college," and get "the kind of education [their parents] could only dream of" (Obama 2008). In mentioning her functional black family, she makes visible the important role black men have played and continue to play in black families. Michelle Obama also spent a significant amount of time describing Barack as being both fully present and hands-on as a father to their daughters:

He's the same man who drove me and our new baby daughter home from the hospital 10 years ago this summer, inching along at a snail's pace, peering anxiously at us in the rearview mirror, feeling the whole weight of her future in his hands, determined to give her everything he'd struggled so hard for himself, determined to give her what he never had: the affirming embrace of a father (Obama 2008).

In other words, he, like her own father, defied the stereotype of black men as deadbeat fathers.

Obama's speeches, thus, indicate that being a "bloodmother" and "othermother" is not predicated on, or even at odds with, the presence of fathers. In fact, she is clear that both her mother's mothering and her own were augmented by the presence of black men who were full-time fathers and who worked full-time outside of the house. Ultimately, Michelle Obama, in her loving reflections on her relationship with her own father and with Barack Obama, effectively disrupts and counters racial stereotypes of black men as "absent," "deadbeats," and "lazy," while challenging the widely held misconception that black mothering and parenting is mostly done alone, and if not alone, only with the support of (and among) other black women. Through her speeches, Michelle Obama encourages us to consider and evaluate society's understanding of the relationship between a black mother and her

partner and/or her children's father, and how that might influence the institution of black motherhood.

Conclusion

Michelle Obama became the first black woman to serve as First Lady of the United States, and as such, she ushered in a new era of visible representation for black women. To truly understand the import of Michelle Obama's legacy as first lady, and the historical significance of a black woman residing in the White House and serving in this capacity — defying stereotypes of black motherhood and revealing tenets of the institution of black motherhood that are informed by African traditions and the reality of racial oppression — one need only reflect on the now-iconic image of a young black girl who was captivated by Michelle Obama's portrait in the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC. To the young toddler, Michelle Obama was larger than life (at least her portrait was, in comparison to her small body). But those of us who lived through the Obama presidency must acknowledge the fact that she did much to improve perceptions of black women in general, and black mothers, specifically.

Although she took on an important role as First Lady of the United States in 2008, Michelle Obama made clear that she prioritized her role as a mother and that one of her priorities during her White House years was finding normalcy amidst the political role she stepped in when her husband became president (Obama 2018a, 328). Black bodies are constantly the focus of the white gaze, whether or not black subjects are aware of it. As such, any action seen within the lens of dominant white perceptions holds racial connotations. As Obama navigated this position in the White House, she entered into the imaginations of the American public, and the dominant stereotypes of black women shaped many peoples' perspectives on Michelle Obama's public and personal identity.

Obama was able to defy the oppressive stereotypes in a number of ways: through her lifestyle and public persona, the messages in her rhetoric and speeches, and numerous policy initiatives. As First Lady of the United States, Michelle Obama was keen to define her role as *mater gentis*, and thus took on the responsibility of "mothering" the nation. She took on initiatives that highlighted the importance of her role as a mother to her own children, which, in turn, extended to her desire to act in that same capacity as "mother of the nation," caring for children, families,

members of the military, and the nation as a whole. It is important to reflect on the fact that, as a racialized subject, even if Obama did not intentionally defy these stereotypes, the racial connotations persist just by her public presence as a black public figure, and especially because she was the first black American to be First Lady of the United States.

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