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Mother Knows Best: The Rhetorical Persona of Michelle Obama and the "Let's Move" campaign

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MOTHER KNOWS BEST: THE RHETORICAL PERSONA OF MICHELLE OBAMA
AND THE “LET’S MOVE” CAMPAIGN

By

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Bachelor of Arts in Communication Studies

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2010

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

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ABSTRACT

**MOTHER KNOWS BEST: THE RHETORICAL PERSONA OF MICHELLE
OBAMA AND THE “LET’S MOVE” CAMPAIGN**

by

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Some first ladies are often condemned for being too involved with the presidents’ power in politics while other first ladies find themselves condemned for the lack of involvement. First ladies, it seems, are damned if they do and damned if they don’t. Consequently, Michelle Obama faces rhetorical problems that in some respects are similar to those of previous first ladies and in other respects are quite different. Along with the criticisms encountered by previous presidential wives, Obama faces the stereotypes African American women have endured since the inception of the nation. Michelle Obama’s “Let’s Move” campaign serves as a rhetorical attempt to overcome those rhetorical problems. Her speeches from the “Let’s Move” campaign exemplify the strategic use of the rhetorical persona to form the image of the archetypal mother and use of identification to create a constitutive audience of American families.

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CHAPTER 1

Michelle Obama: A Mom-in-Chief Campaign

From Martha Washington to Michelle Obama, the role of first ladies has changed tremendously as the woman's role transitioned through the centuries. Every president has served his term with a first lady with the exceptions of John Tyler and Woodrow Wilson who remarried due to the deaths of their first wives during their time in office.¹ Thus, the past forty four presidents have brought with them forty six women into office, each sharing similarities as well as differences. Regardless of the political affiliation, first ladies have encountered criticism relating to their true role as presidential wife.

Paradoxically, some first ladies are condemned for being too involved with their husbands' power in politics and others find themselves condemned for the lack of involvement. First ladies, it seems, are damned if they do and damned if they don't.

The 32nd first lady, Eleanor Roosevelt proclaimed that appropriate campaign behavior for wives was to "[a]lways be on time. Do as little talking as humanly possible and lean back in the parade car so everybody can see the president."² The public's memory of iconic first ladies has created unattainable expectations for their contemporary successors to follow. Although the first lady's responsibilities are not outlined in the Constitution and she is not democratically elected but rather coat-tailed into her position through her husband's agency, she assumes important duties and faces critical assessment from the public's high expectations.³

Contemporary first ladies have sometimes tried to resolve the "damned if they do and damned if they don't" dilemma by embracing causes they see as "safe." Michelle

Obama's involvement in the "Let's Move" campaign is no exception. According to the "Let's Move" official website, Michelle Obama's campaign serves as an effort to tackle the "epidemic of childhood obesity within the present generation."⁴ The official website also states its purpose which is "to bring community leaders, teachers, doctors, nurses, moms and dads in a nationwide effort" to aid in the challenge of childhood obesity.

Michelle Obama's "Let's Move" campaign serves as an important area of rhetorical study. This project spotlights three speeches delivered by Michelle Obama addressing the "Let's Move" campaign from February, 2010, to February, 2011. Specifically, the "Let's Move" Launch speech delivered on February 9, 2010, marks the initial text for analysis considering that Obama introduces the campaign and serves as the entrance to the public sphere as a first lady. Second, the "Let's Move" Anniversary speech delivered on February 9, 2011, allows the first lady to demonstrate the accomplishments of the campaign within the first year and motivate others to continue. Lastly, considering that the element of "race" is added to the first lady's rhetorical problem, it is important to understand how Obama interacts with a largely African American audience. Thus, the address at the NAACP convention on July 12, 2010, marks the area of study.

Importantly, Obama's "Let's Move" campaign serves as a rhetorical effort to disassociate from the traditional role of first lady by leading a social cause; however, her campaign grounds her as a traditional woman given that she chooses to focus on issues revolving family, making it a safe cause. Although previous first ladies such as Barbara and Laura Bush have also directed what can be considered "safe" causes, Michelle Obama carries an additional burden that no other first lady has before. As the wife of the

44th president and first African American president, Michelle Obama faces the rhetorical problem of previous presidential wives but also the rhetorical issue faced by African American women.

Michelle Obama's "Let's Move" campaign is a rhetorical attempt to portray herself as an agent of change through her (or her husband's) political power. However, it is also an attempt to stay within the woman's sphere of politics which revolves around women's issues and the family in order to avoid criticism associated with being a first lady and an African American woman. This project contributes to the field of rhetorical studies in three major ways. First, it increases our understanding of contemporary women's role in politics, specifically the first lady role. Second, given that very little scholarly work is currently available on Michelle Obama, the study increases our understanding of the current first lady. Lastly, it provides insight of Michelle Obama's "Let's Move" campaign speeches.

Literature Review

In order to understand the rhetorical strategies utilized by Michelle Obama in the "Let's Move" campaign, an examination of previous work is necessary. The review of prior research explores the assumptions of women's proper role in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in order to reflect the assumptions about the proper role of first ladies during that era. The stereotypes of African American women reveal the racial issues Michelle Obama must overcome. Lastly, an examination of the contemporary first lady Michelle Obama and the "Let's Move" campaign serve the basis for the review.

Role of woman in Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries

From the inception of the nation, the cult of true womanhood created the basis for woman's proper role in society which limited her to the domestic sphere.⁵ Given that the men went off to work outside the home, it created the view that men should support the family. The public sphere—the field of work—was deemed as a rough place, full of temptations and violence. Any woman seeking to enter that world would easily fall prey to the dangers due to her natural weakness and delicate features.⁶ Thus, the woman's place became the private sphere – the home. The new ideal of the “cult of domesticity” reinforced women's proper role through the coverage in women's magazines, books, and newspapers.

Historian Barbara Walter explains that the cult of true womanhood was the set expectations of what it meant to be a woman in colonial America. The role of woman during the eighteenth century required that she be pious, pure, domestic, and submissive. During the colonial era, women were expected to act as submissive objects because they were in “need” of a protector. Overall, they were portrayed as “innocent victims suffering without sin, too pure and good for the world but too weak and passive to resist its evil force.” Most importantly, they were to remain submissive beings because if they tampered with those expectations, “they were tampering with the Universe.”⁷ Women were also prided on their domesticity that placed them in the role of a comforter and friend. As marriage increased her authority as a woman, motherhood “anchored her more firmly to the home,”⁸ which was her only source of power. The ideal of true womanhood however, is based on middle and upper-middle class white women; not an ideal that would not have applied to Michelle Obama had she lived in that era. Following the

nineteenth century, the cult of true womanhood transitioned into the “new woman” with the coming of the machine age.

The revolt against the cult of domesticity influenced first-wave feminism which initially focused on the equality in marriage and property rights of women. Numerous women campaigned for the abolition of slavery which led them to realize their own oppression.⁹ Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, among other notable women, contributed to the first woman’s rights movement which was considered to have ended with the 19th Amendment. The movement was only termed “first” because second-wave feminism leaders of the 1960s did not believe that the initial efforts for equality succeeded.¹⁰

Role of woman in twentieth century

The birth of second-wave feminism is often credited to the release of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* which urged women to expand beyond the domestic roles of wife and mother. The second-wave movement was concerned with the cultural and political inequalities of women claiming that the “personal is political” as its common idiom. The turn of the twentieth century tremendously transformed the role of women in society. The “new woman” ideology emerged in these years as a reform of the true woman that dominated colonial America.¹¹ The new woman was interested in social reform and personal improvement. However, the image of the new woman varied greatly between 1900 and 1929. As Lisa Burns, professor of Communication and Media Studies explains, the new woman was a “serious-minded college or working woman interested in social reform but then developed into a flirty flapper, whose only interest was in having

fun.”¹² In contrast to the true woman who stood for subservience to the family, the new woman of the twentieth century stood for self-awareness and development.

The 1980s viewpoint then became post-feminism which theorized that women had achieved equality and no longer needed feminism as it was not relevant to society. The main implication of post-feminism is that it is up to each individual woman to make personal choices that reinforce the fundamental social changes brought about second-wave.¹³ Consequently, post-feminism became a way to downplay for the need of collective action for structural change by feminists.

In the 1990s, third-wave feminism sought to challenge the perceived failures of the second-wave and extend the definition of femininity past the experience of upper-middle class white women. Third-wave feminism rejects the universal claim of the second-wave that all women share something in common as women. Instead, third-wave feminism defined the modern woman through the intertwining of gender along with race and class in a sense to highlight that there are “not only differences between women based on race, ethnicity, religion, and economic standing,” but also to allow “for different identities within a single person.”¹⁴ In contrast to the perception of the second-wave feminist mothers, third-wave feminism aims to illustrate women as having interactions with males as equals. First, second, and third-wave feminism however, agree that gender disparities still exist.

Double Bind

Even though women began to rise in the public sphere, certain expectations about the domestic duties were also evident. The expectations were to portray simultaneously the traditional roles and modern ones which ultimately forced women into a double bind.

According to Kathleen Jamieson, the double bind is a strategy used by those in power against those with limited or no power.¹⁵ Double binds draw their power from their capacity to simplify complexity. When faced with difficulties, the human tendency is to split apart and dichotomize elements to contrast good and bad, strong and weak, for and against, true and false, and in so doing assume that one cannot be both at once. Such distinctions can be useful but when they drive us to see life's options or choices available to women as polarities and irreconcilable opposites, those differences become troublesome. As Jamieson explains, the double bind is a rhetorical construct that posits two and only two alternatives, one or both penalizing the person being offered them.

Jamieson's research on women and leadership identifies five double binds that include the womb/brain, silence/shame, sameness/difference, femininity/competence, and aging/invisibility. For this project, the womb/brain, sameness/difference, and femininity/competence apply to Michelle Obama's rhetorical texts. First, the womb/brain double bind casts the world as either/or, with one opposition set as desirable, the other loathsome. Women could use their brains only at the expense of their uteruses; if they did, they risked their essential womanhood.¹⁶ The notion of womb/brain is exemplified in present day given the public still believes that a woman cannot become a great career person and a great mother at the same time. First ladies are no exception to the double bind and must follow the expectations of the double bind by being a wife and a mother, rather than try to take on a career that takes them outside of their realm of wife and mother. Ironically, a first lady would not be a first lady if she was not married to the president. The only power that is accumulated with the position of presidential wife is due to her ability to enter a marriage and maintain the sanctity of her marriage for the

duration of the presidency. Even though not all presidents and their wives had natural children together, they all raised children whether biologically or through adoption; which emphasizes the role of the first lady as wife and mother.¹⁷

Second, the sameness/difference double bind explains how women are constantly judged against a masculine standard as society's default. Once they are compared to the masculine standard they lose, whether they are claiming difference or similarity.¹⁸ The prime problem posed for women by sameness/difference resides in the question, "different from or equal to whom?"¹⁹ The notion of equality versus difference supposed that by empowering women, it disempowers men.²⁰ This created a zero-sum outcome because if one won, the other lost and vice versa. The same outlook is present in the rhetorical problems associated with presidential wives. The sameness/difference bind shapes their identity as a first lady to be quite different from their husband. Thus, they must engage in different matters than their presidential counterparts, which often restrict the first lady's activities to issues relating to women and children rather than those affecting the entire nation.

Lastly, the femininity/competence double bind is designed to undercut women's exercise of power as the other double binds aim to do as well. By requiring both femininity and competence in the public sphere and defining femininity in a way that excludes competence, the double bind creates unattainable expectations for women.²¹ This brand of double standard bypasses partisan lines given that it has no regard for the political affiliation; women are always cast against men. In any aspect of public life (i.e. politics, sports, etc.), women's loss is seen as a result of their own internal failures whereas men's loss is attributed by their opponent's power and strength.²² In the same

regard, first ladies are assumed to embody the qualities of womanhood that portray them as caring and nurturing individuals who remain within the private sphere of the home. Their participation in campaigns largely revolves around family issues because they are seen as competent only in the private realm of life; and thus incompetent in any issues that go beyond the private sphere.

Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century First Ladies

Even though women have moved beyond struggling for the right to speak in public, the right to vote, and to leave the private sphere of the home, first ladies still serve as the image rather than the voice of the presidency. According to Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, gender is a social construction rather than a “physical or biological given; it is enacted and performed bodily, and in order for a ‘woman’ or girl to be an agent... she must ‘cite’ or ‘enact’ cultural norms of femininity.”²³ Thus, first ladies have had to conform to the gender standards reflecting the models of American womanhood. The gender standards however have limited women to the private sphere of the family and home.

Lisa Burns explains that the role of the early first ladies consisted of presidential escort and hostess and most importantly, she was to embody the traditional gender roles while reflecting the changing times. Even though presidential wives were in no doubt public figures, they were portrayed as wives, mothers, and homemakers to reinforce the idea that even the public woman’s domain was within the home.²⁴ Burns states that early presidential spouses acted as “confidantes and informal advisors” to their husbands, but

their influence was often tempered by the notion “that these women were serving as mere helpmates” rather than “political actors in their own right.”²⁵

As each presidential wife encountered the double bind, she constantly tried to disengage from her predecessor’s exercise of the first ladyship. For example, Abigail Adams was the first presidential wife to write openly for publication;²⁶ Dolley Madison was the first to have her volunteerism covered by the press while Lucy Hayes was the first presidential spouse to graduate from college.²⁷ Similarly, Lucretia Garfield was the first presidential spouse to appear on a campaign poster and Ida McKinley the first to appear on campaign buttons. In addition to being involved with their husband’s campaigning, first ladies began to act as social advocates in separation from their husbands.

One of the first presidential wives to be involved in some form of volunteer work was Dolley Madison.²⁸ After the War of 1812, she found the Washington City Orphan Asylum for young children who had lost their parents during the war. She was also selected as the “First Directress,” of the Asylum and became involved in fundraising activities. A number of first ladies were involved with volunteerism during their time in office. Sarah Polk served as the honorary vice president of the Daughters of the American Revolution. Lucy Webb Hayes was involved in the Woman’s Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church which worked to spread Christianity globally. Edith Wilson served as an honorary president of the Girl Scouts, an office filled later by Lou Henry Hoover. Ellen Wilson became involved in Washington D.C.’s National Civic Federation Sanitary Housing Company which worked to improve the poor living conditions for African Americans. In a surprising move at the time, Ellen Wilson lobbied

for the Slum Clearance Bill, renamed “Mrs. Wilson’s Bill,” and surpassed her predecessors by becoming involved directly with legislative matters.²⁹ By the end of the nineteenth century, first ladies had become more than just hostesses, helpmates and volunteers; they were extending their duties to White House managers, campaigners and social advocates. However, the entrance to the public sphere through social advocacy frequently focused on matters concerning the family and children because that was deemed as the woman’s only expertise.

Twentieth Century First Ladies

Lisa Burns explains that first ladies have been largely positioned as role models for American women, “which resulted in their emergence as public women, political celebrities, political activists, or political interlopers.”³⁰ The early American press defined the duties and responsibilities but also set boundaries enclosing first ladies largely within the private sphere. In the beginning of the twentieth century, first ladies were expected to balance the domestic sphere of true womanhood with the social activism of the new woman despite the contradictions of the two ideologies.³¹ Burns explains that the emergence of the first lady as public woman paralleled the rise of the rhetorical presidency and rhetorical first lady, as “presidents and their wives began going public more frequently, targeting their messages to larger public audiences and developing new strategies for controlling their public images.”³² Overall, the modern era first ladies were more vocal, politically active and more publicly visible than the majority of their predecessors.

It was not until the depression and WWII that the first lady was portrayed as a “political celebrity” who inhabited both the public and the domestic spheres.³³ Eleanor

Roosevelt isolated her role as first lady from her predecessors becoming more active in the political realm by authoring articles in women's magazines, holding press conferences, giving radio broadcasts and speaking to women's groups during her tenure in the White House. In addition, she expressed her opinions in a daily syndicated newspaper column, "My Day." Eleanor Roosevelt worked closely with the President's staff as an unofficial Administration representative and on policy-related issues."³⁴ Bess Truman and Mamie Eisenhower on the other hand, were viewed as average American housewives who embraced "Cold War femininity," or the "ideal" of womanhood.³⁵ Jackie Kennedy and Pat Nixon on the other hand were presented as fashion icons which reduced their ability to interact in political matters.

Burns identifies the first ladies from 1964 to 1977 as "political activists" through the personification of the contemporary women who balanced both the family and career life.³⁶ When the first ladies during this era tried to expand their interests beyond the women and children's issues, they were criticized, often harshly. Once again, the "damned if they do and damned if they don't" dilemma was highly visible in this era which led to a no-win situation. For example, Rosalyn Carter's notable 12 day excursion to the Caribbean and Latin America in 1977 sparked great criticism over the first lady's role in international affairs.³⁷ Burns explains that Carter's adding the role of diplomat to the first lady's duties heightened the political influence of the first lady position.

Lastly, between 1980 and 2001 the first lady role became termed as a "political interloper." Nancy Reagan for example was often considered a "behind the scenes manipulator" who sought to advance into the public sphere "by the way of the bedroom."³⁸ Hillary Clinton shared the same pressures of attaining too much power from

her husband's political agency. Both Nancy Reagan and Hillary Clinton were compared to Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth while Barbara and Laura Bush were framed as mere helpmates to their husbands. The activist role was not a positive model for the first lady but served as warning of the consequences of overstepping the first lady boundaries.

Overall, the twentieth century first ladies followed their predecessors' path towards community organizing for social causes. Lady Bird Johnson for example, centered her efforts on environmental issues. She began the "beautification" campaign which aimed to plant more flowers in American cities, to ultimately help children grow in a more "beautiful" place.³⁹ Nancy Reagan launched the "Just Say No" anti-drug campaign which advanced her role as an advocate for young children, while Barbara Bush and her daughter-in-law, Laura, promoted literacy to benefit children.

Even though some first ladies did not oversee any social causes they still endured criticism. First lady researcher Robert Watson states that the first lady is the "most scrutinized lady in the world"⁴⁰ because she carries with her a "heavy symbolic burden."⁴¹ This "heavy symbolic burden" forces first ladies to develop an acceptable persona while on the public stage. Campbell agrees that first ladies have been disadvantaged in their attempts to inhabit both the public and private spheres.⁴² The strong disadvantages concern the difficulty in attending to the first lady role and the criticisms associated with the high-profile position. Myra Gutin, a first lady historian, notes that the first lady persona strongly influences the office she occupies, "simply by virtue of her marriage."⁴³ Gutin claims that first ladies command "influential podiums" which give them the opportunity to become agents of change through political power but their ability to exercise that power relies on their choice to conform to the perspective of

the “ideal woman” within their generation. Campbell also asserts that first ladies face almost impossible rhetorical problems which arise out of “an expectation that they are to represent what we pretend is a single universally accepted ideal for U.S. womanhood.”⁴⁴

In a 1992 *New York Times* editorial Joyce Purnick commented that regardless of their husbands, first ladies are criticized in their own light because “even as the public learns to accept flawed candidates, it persists in demanding some idealized, elusive perfection from political wives.”⁴⁵ This ideal, for Purnick, forces first ladies to walk a tightrope between “too much” and “not enough,” resulting in criticism stemming from such double binds: “Eleanor Roosevelt was too independent. Jacqueline Kennedy was too passive. Nancy Reagan was too controlling. Barbara Bush was too gray. Hillary Clinton... too independent.”⁴⁶

When the first ladies acted as advocates for causes that benefited women and children, they were deemed to be acting within the proper spheres of first lady and their coverage in the press was more positive, often reflecting the domestic empowerment of previous eras. However, when first ladies were perceived to have too much power, either in public like Clinton or in private like Reagan, their coverage was critical. Regardless of the role first ladies choose, they represent the model for American women. Taking into consideration that a black man is now the “most powerful man on earth,” the first lady being a “black woman” changes the national imagery of true womanhood.

African American woman stereotypes

While Michelle Obama faces the rhetorical problems of previous first ladies, she also encounters the common stereotypes of African American women. According to Ann duCille, professor of African American studies, Black women have been objectified as

the “other,” the second sex serving as “the last race, the most oppressed, the most marginalized, the most deviant, the quintessential site of difference.”⁴⁷ African American women have been either largely invisible in the public sphere, fading into the categories of Blacks or women or have been stereotyped as non-feminine and tough.⁴⁸ As Dewey Clayton, professor of Political Science and Angela Stallings explain, current media portray Black women as being “impulsive, hot-headed, domineering, and generally uncooperative” which contrasts with the images of White women as “kind, compassionate, gentle, and soft spoken.”⁴⁹

African American Studies scholar K. Sue Jewell explains that while cultural images of most racial groups have changed over time, the cultural images of African American women have changed only minimally. When changes have occurred they have been slight changes in physical characteristics, while the intellectual make-up of the culture has been extremely slow to surface.⁵⁰ Until the 1980s, African American women were typically portrayed in essentially four categories that Jewell identifies as the Mammy, Aunt Jemima, Sapphire and Jezebel⁵¹ or in general terms, the matriarch and the bad-black-girl.

The matriarch began with the Mammy construct which originated in the South but spread rapidly through the U.S. The Mammy was depicted as a submissive woman towards her owner or employer but an aggressor towards African American males. She was portrayed as an obese woman of dark complexion, satisfied and content with her station in domestic life which mostly served “to challenge critics who argued that slavery was harsh and demeaning.”⁵² The Aunt Jemima construct was a minor role in relation to the other three but was still evident in African American women’s culture. The basis for

Aunt Jemima was the Mammy role but with one main distinction: Aunt Jemima's task of domestic life was limited to cooking.⁵³ The Sapphire also most identified with a contemporary matriarch who is solely reliant upon the presence of a corrupt African American man whose "lack of integrity and use of cunning and trickery provide her with an opportunity to emasculate him" through verbal put-downs.⁵⁴ The Sapphire was also depicted as a physically large woman of dark brown complexion whose primary role was to undermine black men in an animated loud manner.⁵⁵

Most often cited in scholarly work is the cultural role of the Jezebel or the bad-black-girl. She is defined as a sexually promiscuous and aggressive woman whose seductive, hypersexual role was to exploit white men's weaknesses.⁵⁶ The Jezebel served as the counter-image of the nineteenth century ideal of the true woman.⁵⁷ Deborah White, professor of History, traces the historical development of the Jezebel back to the time of slavery when the slave owners used black slave women for their sexual pleasure and the reproduction of more slaves. Thus, the Jezebel role was constructed to invalidate the rumors and beliefs that slave owners had any sexual interest in female slaves. The black slave women were seducing the slave owners with their hyper-sexuality which could be the ultimate explanation for their relationship.⁵⁸ Even though the Jezebel was a construct of the colonial era, the image transcended to the twentieth century. In the 1920s for example, there was a strong fascination with the black female body that increased her function as an "erotic icon" and shaped the racial and sexual ideology.⁵⁹ Although the transition of more African American women into public sphere has altered public perceptions of African American women to a degree, these cultural constructs are still evident in today's society.

Even within the African American community, distinctions based on skin color exist. As Maxine Thompson and Verna Keith explain, African Americans with white ancestors, “led a more privileged existence when compared with their black counterparts,” and in areas of the Deep South, a mixed race served as a barrier between whites and blacks.⁶⁰ For example, “blue vein” societies became noticeable among the Black community as they accepted members based on their skin tone. In order to be admitted, one’s skin tone had to be “lighter than a paper bag or light enough for the visibility of blue veins,⁶¹” which is the origin for the name of the “blue vein” societies. By and large, constructs of black women varied by the White community’s perception as well as the Black. The perceptions of Black women created the stereotypes that even Michelle Obama must overcome.

Michelle Obama

Before Michelle Obama appeared in the public spotlight, she was Michelle Robinson, the daughter of Fraser—a pump operator for the Chicago Water Department and Mariam—a stay-at-home mom.⁶² Even though she was an educated woman with a career, it was not until her husband, Barack Obama, entered the Presidential race in 2008 that marked her entrance to the public sphere. With the aid of her husband, she made the transition from private life to the public, political arena. Michelle Obama falls into a long line of first ladies who have sought to overcome the rhetorical problems faced by presidential wives.

Because public perceptions of first ladies grew from the white upper-middle class women that came before her, Michelle Obama is assessed against those standards. Although Obama’s focus on the family addresses the topic of race as the “core of her

rhetorical orientation”⁶³ it is still evident to her audience that she is an African American woman. For example, at the unveiling of the Sojourner Truth memorial in Emancipation Hall at U.S. Capitol Hill, Obama commented that “now many young boys and girls, like my own daughters, will come to Emancipation Hall and see the face of a woman who looks like them.” She also added that she hopes “Sojourner Truth would be proud to see [her], a descendant of slaves, serving as the first lady of the United States of America.”⁶⁴ For this reason, I have chosen one of the texts to be her speech at the NAACP convention which addresses an African American audience.

Even though the cult of true womanhood might seem as an outdated concept, it still thrives in the public imagery of Michelle Obama. Articles contrast Michelle Obama’s “populist” style with Nancy Reagan’s “formal” style and Barbara Bush’s “disciplined decorum” and question Obama’s capacity to move “gracefully” into her new role as “America’s hostess.”⁶⁵ Editorials in the *Los Angeles Times* noted that first ladies rise and fall on important details such as the “selection of the ‘menus’ and ‘china’.”⁶⁶ Reports on Obama’s White House etiquette note that her taste for “mean waffles and grits” along with her mix of “three different china patterns for her first formal dinner” raises questions about how the public will perceive her as a presidential hostess.

Let’s Move campaign

Michelle Obama has proclaimed that raising her children is her full time job and has identified herself as the “Mom-in-Chief” which serves as her primary role in the White House.⁶⁷ Consequently, her “Let’s Move” campaign serves as an extension of her role as “Mom-in-Chief” in the White House but also in American culture. In an interview with *Essence* magazine, Obama explained that life in the White House has further united

her family, saying that “[we still eat] dinner as a family, [we] spend... more time together than we have in years. And it really feels good.”⁶⁸ When asked during the magazine interview about her role as a first lady she responded, “This is a big responsibility, a wonderful platform and I just want... to serve as a role model, to provide good messages, to be a supportive mate to the President and to make sure that my girls are solid.”⁶⁹ In this statement, Obama is describing herself as a “mate” to her husband, emphasizing her first lady role as a supportive partner rather than a political advisor. The second part of the statement emphasizes raising her daughters; further embedding her role in family matters.

Mary Kahl, professor of Communication Studies, also emphasizes Obama’s “priorities.” Kahl explains that Obama is determined to highlight her motherhood through her attentive manner to publicize the details relating to the welfare of her daughters.⁷⁰ Furthermore, Kahl explains that Obama has attempted to make the White House into a “kid-friendly” zone in order to raise her family as normal as possible. Overall, Obama’s heavy emphasis on her daughters highlights the importance of family in her role as a first lady. Kahl explains that such claims to family portray her as living in a middle-class existence and the “carefree images of playing on the New White House swing set, ... planting a vegetable garden on the West Lawn, and ... reading to school children reinforce this nonthreatening focus on motherhood and family.”⁷¹

Given that Michelle Obama proclaims her role in family matters—her own family in particular—it is not surprising that she would embrace a cause devoted to bettering the livelihood of young children. The “Let’s Move” campaign’s purpose, in Obama’s own words, gives parents support to provide their children with healthier food in schools, to

help them be more physically active and ensure that healthy and affordable food is available to all Americans.⁷² Obama states on the official “Let’s Move” website, “In the end, as First Lady, this isn’t just a policy issue for me. This is a passion. This is my mission. I am determined to work with folks across this country to change the way a generation of kids thinks about food and nutrition.” Thus, Obama’s “Let’s Move” campaign extends the first lady’s agency as a reach to help American families become health conscious.

Coincidentally, her “Let’s Move” launch speech delivered on February 9, 2010, influenced President Barack Obama to sign a Presidential Memorandum on the same day which created the first-ever Task Force on childhood obesity.⁷³ The Task Force conducted a review of all the programs and policies relating to childhood nutrition in order to develop a national plan to maximize federal resources and set benchmarks toward the First Lady’s national campaign. The goal of both the campaign and Task Force is to reduce the rate of childhood obesity to 5% by 2030, the same rate it was in the late 1970s before childhood obesity became a critical concern.⁷⁴ The Task Force includes approximately 70 specific recommendations to be implemented on federal, state, or private sectors. President Obama’s Task Force is an important factor in Michelle Obama’s campaign because it forces political support for a first lady’s social program. The “Let’s Move” campaign transcended from a first lady promotion to a presidential agenda point.

Method

Initial readings of Michelle Obama's texts suggest that she embodies the "Mom-in-Chief" persona in order to construct her credibility or *ethos* on the issue of childhood obesity. Through her mother persona, Michelle Obama is able to create the mother archetype. Obama's emphasis on the common experiences between her audience and herself allows her to identify with her audience and thus create or call her audience into being. Thus, her identification serves as a persuasion tool to exemplify the use constitutive rhetoric.

Persona

Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Thomas R. Burkholder explain that persona is the role a speaker takes in order to achieve a strategic purpose, often reached through the use of language.⁷⁵ On a larger scale, persona also influences the audience to create the speaker's *ethos*. Charles Morris adds that a speaker's persona that differentiates from the audience often "motivates some to develop and sustain double consciousness" in order to "survive amid and sometimes to resist dominant, oppressive cultural practices."⁷⁶ Double consciousness, Morris explains, is used when the speaker's differences such as their skin, behavior or dress can be camouflaged to express themselves as more publicly likable. In order to convince a certain audience of an "acceptable persona," the rhetor must employ "tactics of impersonation, deflection, and silence in the public sphere." These three elements collectively, Morris terms as the rhetorical action of "passing," which is not simply a disguise but a "virtuoso tightrope performance."⁷⁷

In her speech announcing the "Let's Move" campaign, Obama assumes a persona of "Mom-in-Chief" to produce her derived credibility. In her "Let's Move" launch speech

she explains that the issue at hand is of great concern to her “not just as a First Lady, but as a mom.”⁷⁸ She continuously describes the subjects of the campaign as “our kids” rather than children in general, further embedding the notion of mother as her persona. She expresses the key element in the “Mom-in-Chief” persona as she states that, “We are in charge; we make the decisions,” as a way to empower the parents. She explains that the campaign is not about politics or divided between partisan lines; instead it is about “what’s best for our kids.”⁷⁹ By explicitly eliminating the political aspect of the campaign, Michelle Obama tries to personify the role of mother rather than the role of a First Lady.

Mother Archetype

Through assuming the mother persona, Obama constructs a classical image of motherhood or the mother archetype. According to Robert Langbaum, professor of American literature, when speakers adopt an archetype, they are adopting to a universally-agreed persona.⁸⁰ B.L. Ware and Wil A. Linkugel explain that when a speaker’s adopted character becomes so closely identified with the perceived set of human experiences or ideas that it becomes almost impossible for the audience to think of anyone other than the archetype, then that speaker has enhanced their credibility.⁸¹ Sara Ruddick, a feminist philosopher explains that the mother archetype specifically, is grounded on the woman’s role as a mother, and the work that she carries while raising a child.⁸² A mother must care for the physical, social, and emotional condition of the child and nurture them in a healthy environment. The archetypal mother possesses nurturing, patient, helpful, and supportive characteristics.⁸³ This archetype casts the mother by characterizing women’s instincts to nurture and take care of children as a natural

phenomenon.⁸⁴ However, this illustrates the role of women as bound by their natural ability to care for their offspring and the wellbeing of all children.

The most important inference of the mother archetype is its ability to transcend any cultural, historical, political, racial, and religious boundaries. Rhetorical studies professor Lynne Stearney explains that the public's understanding of motherhood crosses "historical periods, social conditions, and cultural boundaries."⁸⁵ Motherhood is found essentially in every religion, culture or myth, thus its cross-cultural nature can be understood as an archetype.⁸⁶ Consequently, archetypes possess the rhetorical power to transcend cultures especially when presented with a problematic audience.

Overall, Michelle Obama's persona as "Mom-in-Chief" is evident in all three of her speeches that guide her in constructing her credibility as a rhetor. In addition to creating the mother archetype, Michelle Obama identifies herself with the audience who she addresses to be American families. In order to reach to her audience, they must feel that she shares common experiences, interests, and motives. Obama succeeds in doing just that.

Identification

As Kenneth Burke explains, A is not identical with B, but insofar as their interests are joined, A is identified with B.⁸⁷ The rhetor is not identical to the audience; however, the speaker aims to identify themselves with the audience in order to create a similarity which serves as a strategy for persuasion. In identifying with the interests of the audience or persuading them that certain interests are shared, the speaker becomes "substantially one" or "consubstantial" with the audience; all while retaining one's own unique

substance. As Barbara Biesecker concludes, "In the historical moment of identification, the human being 'both is and is not one' with that other."⁸⁸ Identification, whether with individuals, associations, or ideas, is never complete since humans are always "closing the gap between self and other."⁸⁹

An important factor is that people frequently do not think of themselves as being in a particular group until an issue is made of it. First ladies such as Truman and Eisenhower, were able to identify with their audience in a time when both print media and politicians were more focused on images, which visually represented the average American housewife and Cold War femininity. Such framing encouraged readers to identify with the first lady, making the "ideal" of womanhood more attainable by the "typical" woman, primarily through consumption.⁹⁰ In the same manner, Michelle Obama is able to identify with her audience not only as a "typical woman" but also as a "typical mother."

By and large, Michelle Obama's speeches suggest that she is identifying with her audience of parents by using family inclusive language but also with her African American audience in the NAACP speech. In addition to the creation of the Mom-in-Chief persona as a bridge to bring the mother archetype to her audience's mind, and use of inclusive language to identify with her audience, an examination of the speeches suggests that Michelle Obama goes beyond just identifying with her audience but actually creates her target audience.

Constitutive rhetoric

Michelle Obama's "Let's Move" campaign speeches exhibit a unique strategy of constitutive rhetoric which she uses to call her audience into being and to become agents

of change. Maurice Charland explains that constitutive rhetoric enables the speaker to draw a “constitutive audience” by appealing to their ideology.⁹¹ Most importantly, the speaker gives the audience a reason or purpose to be part of the group strictly differentiated from any other audiences. Constitutive rhetoric recognizes that persuasion implies that people are free to be persuaded, and as Charland explains, that to assume an “audience’s freedom to judge is problematic for it assumes that audiences, with their prejudices and interests and motives are given.”⁹² Michelle Obama provides her constitutive audience reasons why they may have been the way they have for so long but ensures them that they “desperately want to do the right thing,” and provides them with numerous solutions as outlined in the “Let’s Move” campaign.⁹³ Obama creates her audience by calling them to become agents rather than just to persuade them about the campaign efforts.

However, Jacqueline Bacon argues that characterizing African American discourse as constitutive can be advantageous. African Americans who enter the public sphere as subjects advocating on their own behalf “challenge white’s constructions of rhetoric, race, and nation” as agents to create a “public black identity that asserts their position in the nation.”⁹⁴ Michelle Obama’s speech at the NAACP convention also achieves a black identity within the “Let’s Move” campaign. Although the “Let’s Move” campaign is not solely focused on African American children, Obama adapts her speech to call the African American community into being.

Overall, Michelle Obama’s speeches exemplify constitutive rhetoric as a way to create her “constitutive audience” and call American families into action. Rather than addressing her audience as a first lady or lawyer, she focuses on her mother identity.

Obama's persona of "Mom-in-Chief," creates a mother archetype allowing her to transcend any racial, cultural or religious boundaries by which she may be confined. Thus, her ability to identify with American families as a mother allows her to create a constitutive audience. The theoretical constructs of persona and identification serve as the basis for analyzing Obama's "Let's Move" campaign speeches.

This study will focus on three of Michelle Obama's "Let's Move" campaign speeches delivered between February, 2010, and February, 2011, in effort to understand Michelle Obama as a contemporary first lady who must overcome the rhetorical problems shared with previous first ladies and African American women. Chapter Two frames Obama's rhetorical problems as a first lady and an African American woman. The chapter details the criticisms previous first ladies have endured along with the stereotypes that have branded African American women. Lastly, current criticisms of Obama specifically conclude the chapter to help shed light into the explicit rhetorical problems she faces when entering the public sphere. Chapter Three creates the theoretical grounding for studying Obama's "Let's Move" campaign speeches. The constructs of persona as a tool to create a mother archetype and use of identification to bridge a constitutive audience are examined. The theoretical grounding of persona and identification guide the analysis as presented in Chapter Four. The textual analysis examines Obama's "*Let's Move*" *Launch* speech delivered on February 9, 2010, her address at the NAACP convention on July 12, 2010, and her "*Let's Move*" *Anniversary* speech on February 9, 2011, to shed light on her unique rhetorical strategies. The concluding chapter discusses the results of the analysis as well as the implications of the study.

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CHAPTER 2

The Trials and Tribulations of an African American First Lady

The first ladyship has existed since the nation's inception and even predates the White House.¹ Even though the first lady coat-tails into her position through her husband's agency, she holds an important position during her tenure in the White House. The current first lady, Michelle Obama, follows a long line of women who have entered the position and subjected themselves to intense public scrutiny. Whether they are deemed too political in attempts to influence policy or too uninvolved with their husband's politics, they are constantly criticized. Obama faces the same criticism as her predecessors but also the problems arising from being the first African American first lady. This chapter details the criticisms previous first ladies have endured, the historical stereotypes haunting African American women, and the rhetorical problems Michelle Obama must deal with whenever she addresses an audience. In order to understand the rhetorical problems Obama must face, or issues associated with being a public figure, an explanation of the term and role of "first lady" is necessary.

Although the origin of the term "first lady" remains unclear, it can be traced back to the woman who made the position popular. When President Zachary Taylor spoke during Dolley Madison's funeral in 1849, he referred to her as "our first lady" who has made an impact even after her retirement from the White House position.² The term was not immediately utilized to refer to the presidential spouses but appeared from time to time until it became printed in dictionaries in the twentieth century. According to Robert

Watson, the role of the first lady was initiated to manage the social affairs of the White House, ranging from “formal state dinners, to visiting dignitaries, to afternoon receptions for women’s social clubs, to the annual children’s Easter-egg roll on the White House lawn.”³ In addition, first ladies hold a rather domestic duty to oversee the staff, plan the menus, seating arrangements, and entertainment for a variety of events. As Watson explains, historically, the first lady has acted as “chief preservationist, archivist, and tour guide of the White House,” and some have extended their duties to social activism or advocacy.⁴ More recent presidential spouses have been identified with a particular social cause or as some have called it, a “pet project.”⁵ Although not all have crusaded on social activism, all have had to overcome rhetorical problems associated with being a woman public figure, even when women were not considered part of the public sphere.

The U.S. has its first African American president, and with him, its first African American woman serving as first lady. Michelle Obama, however, is unique in that she must juggle the presidential spouse role as an African American woman in a largely white dominated political sphere. She faces the shared experiences and tribulations of previous first ladies in addition to some of her own. However, Obama’s title as the first African American first lady combines the common troubles presidential wives had to endure in addition to the stereotypes of African American women. As the embodiment of American womanhood of her time, Michelle Obama must overcome these stereotypes. A contextual background of the criticisms first ladies have endured can illuminate the constantly changing expectations of presidential wives.

Criticisms of First Ladies

Ironically, first ladies are often subjected to criticism for their political activism even when it is in reaction to public expectations. Americans have yet to reach a consensus on the expectations for a first lady or how much involvement it prefers for the presidential spouse. According to Robert Watson, a first ladies scholar, presidential wives suspend their own careers for the political interests of the “team.”⁶ A minimum of formal guidelines exist for the duties of first ladies since the Constitution does not mention the role of the presidential spouse. This does not mean that first ladies can behave in a manner they alone determine. As Watson explains, first ladies “must take into account the fickle winds of public opinion, major events of the day, and of course the president’s preferences.”⁷ Historically, marriage was one of the only routes to some form of political power for women. Although women have made significant progress in American society and today serve in nearly every public office except the presidency, the first lady position remains a great form of political power. With great power though, comes great responsibility, which imitates a great amount of criticism.

The forty-six first ladies have faced numerous rhetorical problems or issues associated with being public figures. First ladies have served largely without proper recognition, and they have endured public criticism which made some popular icons and others forgotten. In order to understand the rhetorical problems the current first lady faces, a contextual background of the unelected, unappointed, and unpaid position is necessary. First ladies have been criticized for being either too involved or not involved enough during their tenure, making it much more difficult to understand the public’s expectations of the first ladyship. Through examination, four themes appear to highlight

the criticisms presidential wives have endured: a) the first lady playing a non-traditional role centered on the “too powerful” persona, b) the first lady as the center of a scandal, c) the first lady as an extravagant spender, and d), the first lady as a hidden figure.

First Lady as “Too Powerful”

The criticism of presidential spouses began rather early with one of the best-read and politically powerful women of the time, Abigail Adams. Abigail Adams excelled as a presidential hostess but she also demonstrated her capacity as a political confidante.⁸ Her continuous attempts to restrict negative press coverage of her husband through hostility towards journalists became highly unpopular. The president’s enemies criticized Adams for her power and strong involvement by calling the first lady “her majesty.”⁹ A non-traditional Dolley Madison, however, became one of the most admired and well-known first ladies of all time.¹⁰ She became one of the first women covered by the press and earned the popular nicknames “Lady Presidentess” and “Queen Dolley.”¹¹ She helped establish the first ladyship and started the first White House renovation while making social hostessing and fashion the prominent features of the first lady position. Although she was not considered an intellectual, her conversational style made her seem bold and nontraditional in her actions.¹² Elizabeth Monroe, however, did not receive the same recognition for practices that had earned Madison fame.

Elizabeth Monroe was criticized for many of the same practices as Dolley Madison, which made it very difficult to determine what the public expected from the presidential spouse. Monroe chose to end the tradition of responding to requests to engage in events with political wives and began to continuously travel outside of the

presidential mansion. In the early 1800s, the custom was that when the first lady was not present for an event, women did not join their spouses at the White House functions. Her decision to opt out of the functions was seen as disrespect by the political wives who felt they were not welcome at the Monroe White House.¹³ In 1819, several women boycotted her socials to show their disapproval.

A non-traditional first lady regarded as too powerful was Sarah Polk. She talked openly with reporters and preferred to join the men after dinner to discuss politics rather than small talk over tea with the ladies of Washington.¹⁴ Polk became involved in her husband's presidency and attended cabinet meetings and discussed politics with the White House guests but was careful to preface comments with, "Mr. Polk believes..."¹⁵ Rumors circulated that she "ruled" her husband and the vice-President commented that "she is certainly mistress of herself and I suspect of somebody else also."¹⁶ As Betty Boyd Caroli, a first ladies scholar, explains, Sarah Polk stands out as a woman who in another age could have run for office herself but the education and political standards of her time left her ill prepared.¹⁷ Caroli describes Helen Taft in the same manner.

Helen Taft, the politician in the Taft family, became quickly bored of the social gossip with political wives and preferred debating issues with men. Unlike many of her predecessors who were engaged in the president's politics, Polk did not attempt to hide her influence and her unconventional ways became the target of her husband's political enemies.¹⁸ She was the first presidential wife to help plan the inauguration and most importantly break the tradition and ride alongside the president on inaugural day. She was also the first to address the media openly which was largely unheard of for women of the day, much less first ladies.¹⁹

Similar to Taft's powerful presence, Edith Wilson became a supporting wife and joined her husband in Paris for the peace talks that resulted in the signing of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. Her international trip however raised concerns when she failed to properly bow when meeting the queen of England.²⁰ In early 1919, President Wilson suffered from a thrombosis (the closing of an artery to the brain) which caused him to take time away from politics.²¹ During the president's bed rest, Edith Wilson served as his liaison, meeting with top aids and department heads which sparked much criticism from the Secretary of State, Robert Lansing, and the press complaining of "Mrs. Wilson's regency" and the "petticoat government."²² Edith Wilson's "too powerful" demeanor led to her being negatively labeled "Presidentress" while president Wilson was called the "first man," for his inability to restrain the first lady to her proper role.²³

Another first lady deemed non-traditional was Lou Hoover who struggled with the press as they regarded her as unattractive and unfashionable. One of her most criticized actions in the White House was to invite the black wife of Illinois Congressman DePriest for tea in 1929.²⁴ After Jessie DePriest's visit, several southern states including Georgia, Florida and Texas passed resolutions in their state legislatures condemning Lou Hoover.

None of the first ladies to date were as powerful and influential as Eleanor Roosevelt. The majority of press coverage was positive due to her cultivated relationships with female journalists whom she granted exclusive interviews.²⁵ Because polio had left the president in a wheelchair, Roosevelt traveled for him, becoming the most traveled first lady in history.²⁶ She lobbied for the Federal Writers Project and Federal Theater Project and for her many ties with civil rights, she was condemned in the southern press

and even received death threats from the Ku Klux Klan.²⁷ She was brave to oppose the internment of citizens of Japanese descent during World War II and argued with Congress to allow more Jewish refugees in the U.S. She risked public scrutiny and disagreed with her husband's positions on the war, but history judged the first lady correct in her actions.²⁸

Lady Bird Johnson's four day trip through eight southern states for Johnson's campaign marked her non-traditional territory as the first presidential wife to embark on a long trip for her husband's campaign.²⁹ A similar activist, Betty Ford was known as a crusader for the Equal Rights Amendment and a supporter of abortion. She often spoke about offering amnesty to those who evaded the draft during the Vietnam War, promoted handgun registration, and reducing sentences for first-time offenders caught using marijuana.³⁰ Her response to the critics about her progressive involvement in politics was that "being ladylike does not require silence."³¹ Nancy Reagan was also a strong believer of that statement. Reagan was aggressive with those she suspected of not having the president's best interests in mind and often limited his schedule to what she thought was adequate for his health.³² Consequently, aids complained about an "unnecessary intervention by the first lady and feared the president would appear to be dominated by his wife."³³ Her public image suffered when she was called "Queen Nancy" and "Dragon Lady," but she tried to improve her image through her "Just Say No" campaign to discourage youth drug use. Although she seldom discussed policy issues, she worked closely with the president's appointments, travel, public appearances, and ceremonial functions and acted as an enforcer of the high-profile firings in the administration.³⁴

Perhaps no other recent first lady has endured more harsh criticism as Hillary Rodham Clinton. An attorney, she was comfortable discussing policy issues and was quick to jump on the task force charged with health care reform. The appointment of Clinton as head of the task force was legally challenged by opponents, which made the role and activities of the first lady a subject of national debate and consideration by the courts.³⁵ The first lady frequently lobbied members of Congress, participated in senior-level policy discussions with the Clinton administration, and was a powerful fundraiser at Democratic Party events. But her influence and activism created controversy among those uncomfortable with such visibility and power in the role of first lady. Rarely has a presidential spouse received such hostility from the media and the president's opponents.³⁶ The spotlight became harsher when she commented, "You know, I suppose I could have stayed home and baked cookies and had teas, but what I decided to do was fulfill my profession, which I entered before my husband was in public life," even though the last segment was often ignored when quoting Clinton.³⁷

Ultimately, Abigail Adams, Dolley Madison, Elizabeth Monroe, Sarah Polk, Helen Taft, Edith Wilson, Lou Hoover, Eleanor Roosevelt, Lady Bird Johnson, Betty Ford, Nancy Reagan and Hillary Clinton exercised what seemed to be a "too powerful" persona as first ladies. Their involvement in their husband's politics led some to become popular women and others to be attacked. In addition to the "too powerful" persona, some first ladies are historically known for their involvement in a scandal.

First Lady in the center of a scandal

First ladies are often looked upon as celebrities for their public status. Many however, have found their public image tarnished due to a political or social scandal during their tenure in the presidential mansion. The first lady to first be subjected to remarks of a scandal was Emily Tennessee Donelson, the presidential hostess for Andrew Jackson. The president's wife passed away prior to his inauguration and, thus, the social hostess position was fulfilled by his nephew's wife, Emily Tennessee Donelson.³⁸ Even though Donelson was not married to the president, she was still regarded as a first lady. Donelson eventually left her duties as first lady when she became overwhelmed with the Peggy Eaton scandal. Peggy Eaton, the wife of the Secretary of War and alleged mistress of several men whose affairs became public caused problems for the administration. Andrew Jackson supported Peggy Eaton and when her love affairs became a public spectacle, the President demanded Eaton to be accepted to all of the state dinners, receptions and White House events.³⁹ Although she was the wife of the Secretary of War, the wives of other cabinet officials and much of the Washington society refused to accept her. When Peggy Eaton declined to attend one of the receptions at the White House, she claimed that Emily Donelson's harsh treatment was the reason. Finally, Donelson's refusal to accommodate Eaton forced the President to remove his niece from the White House.⁴⁰

Another first lady criticized due to a social scandal was Edith Roosevelt. Although Roosevelt was a well-received presidential wife, the press created a large commotion in the end of the president's tenure in the White House. The press claimed

that she tried to steal a White House sofa, even though she had purchased the sofa from the family's savings.⁴¹

One of the most ludicrous scandals though may have revolved around Florence Harding. During her first ladyship, a story in the press emerged that she had African ancestors; the public along with the first lady were in fury.⁴² Of course during the 1920s, African heritage was a kiss of death. Harding is remembered as an active and assertive woman but also as a failed first lady, largely because of the scandals associated with the president's death and her burning of the Harding papers.⁴³ In 1923, the Hardings began a tour called the "Voyage of Understanding" where they visited Alaska and Canada but as they were heading to California, the president became very ill and died in San Francisco. Some speculated, that Mrs. Harding had deliberately poisoned her husband.⁴⁴ The first lady refused to allow an autopsy to be performed on the president which further led to the public's suspicion about Mrs. Harding. When she returned to the Washington, she burned every personal paper she could find in order to save her reputation.

More recently, Betty Ford was under public scrutiny. She often fought her depression with alcohol and later became addicted to painkillers.⁴⁵ During an interview on *60 Minutes*, she commented that it was possible that her daughter engaged in pre-marital sex, but as a mother she was always going to support her. Ministers and parishioners across the southern Bible belt criticized the first lady and the Women's Christian Temperance Union censured her.⁴⁶ Nancy Reagan endured much criticism for her decision to refer to an astrologer during her tenure in the White House. When the public learned that Reagan often consulted an astrologer and then acted on the advice, her already plummeting image sank further.⁴⁷

Barbara Bush, on the other hand, was well-liked for her first ladyship. Although she did not bring any lasting changes to the office and was one of the least politically active first ladies, she was quite popular. Known as the “Silver Fox” for her grandmotherly looks, the public was eager to embrace her especially after the controversy surrounding Nancy Reagan. In 1990, she was invited to Wellesley College to deliver the commencement address but some students protested that her credibility as a career-less, college drop-out would not portray her as a role model for young women. Barbara Bush handled the controversy masterfully by responding that she understood the criticism. She took Raisa Gorbachev, Russia’s first lady, as a guest to the ceremony and ended her speech by suggesting that someone in the audience might have the good fortune to follow in her footsteps as the spouse of the president, closing with the line, “And I wish *him* well!”⁴⁸ It was exactly what the young, educated Wellesley graduates wanted to hear.

Scandal also surrounded Hillary Rodham Clinton’s reaction to the President’s love affair with Monica Lewinsky, but despite damaging President Clinton’s reputation, the affair seemed almost to benefit Hillary Clinton.⁴⁹ Her public approval rating increased during and after the affair, partly due the public statements she made defending her husband. Hillary was applauded for her commitment to her marriage during the scandal which reinforced the role of first lady as wife, “a role less controversial to the public than that of political activist or presidential adviser.”⁵⁰

Ultimately, first ladies have often found themselves in the center of scandals which increased the acceptance for some presidential wives and damaged the public image of others. Emily Tennessee Donelson, Edith Roosevelt, Florence Harding, Betty Ford, Nancy Reagan, Barbara Bush, and Hillary Clinton all endured public criticism due

to the political or social scandals that revolved around their time in the White House.

Whenever first ladies weren't criticized about their too powerful persona or the scandals, they were judged about their lavish expenses.

First Lady as an extravagant spender

One of the most common themes of criticism for first ladies has been their extravagant spending. For example, Elizabeth Monroe was criticized for being too French and not American enough for adopting elements of the European courts in her social tastes. This led to the attack of her "excessive" taste in fashion which she did not share with the average American woman of the time.⁵¹ Similarly, Julia Tyler shared the reputation of excessive tastes with her peacock plumes and elegant dresses.⁵² The public's criticism did not only focus on the first lady's attire. Harriet Lane Johnston, the first lady surrogate under James Buchanan, was accused of spending congressional funds too lavishly to redecorate the White House.⁵³

Above all, Mary Lincoln was known as the most extravagant spender. Lincoln continuously worried about what to wear, how she looked, and what others would think about her White House dinners. Most of all, she was worried that the public and press would view her as unrefined and "country." In order to counteract those fears, she traveled to New York City for a lavish shopping spree which sent the wrong message to a country more concerned with the Civil War.⁵⁴ Lincoln hosted impressive state dinners but because of the wartime hardships, they were seen as inappropriate and excessive. When she tried to renovate the White House it was seen as unnecessary and extravagant. For example, she was reported to have sent an assistant to Paris to purchase china and

wallpaper for the White House and ordered an extra set for herself. The press launched numerous attacks calling her the “American Queen.”⁵⁵

Nancy Reagan was also criticized for her glamorous expenses. The public perceived Reagan as artificial and excessively materialistic. Stories circulated about the high cost of the inauguration she was planning, the jewelry and gown she wore to the event, along with all the other lavish events she hosted. The rather expensive redecorations she oversaw were also a part of the criticism that never seemed to end.⁵⁶

Overall, Elizabeth Monroe, Julia Tyler, Harriet Lane Johnston, Mary Lincoln, and Nancy Reagan endured heavy criticism about their lavish lifestyles and spending in the White House when the country was more concerned with the dire economic times. As these first ladies aimed to exemplify the role of the first lady in an extravagant light, the following aimed to remain hidden and uninvolved figures.

First Lady as a hidden figure

Perhaps the last theme to discuss about first ladies is quite evidently the shortest due to the lack of involvement in the public. Letitia Tyler for example chose not to accompany her husband to the White House for his inauguration and gave the presidential hostess position to her daughter-in-law. When she did finally live in the White House she was always hidden in her room. The only time she made an appearance was for her daughter’s wedding.⁵⁷

Margaret Taylor on the other hand, joined her husband in the White House but did not attempt to fulfill any duties associated with the first ladyship. She remained largely out of the public eye during her time there, and retreated to the private living quarters just

as Letitia Tyler had done.⁵⁸ A more likely reason for Taylor's lack of involvement is that she simply was not interested in being first lady. She declined an invitation from President James Polk to dine with him before President Taylor's inauguration and then failed to attend the inaugural ceremony.⁵⁹ Her lack of interest in the first ladyship left Taylor's opponents and the press to call his wife a "bumpkin."

Jane Pierce's reason for remaining a hidden first lady differed from the previous two. At the beginning of her husband's term, she rarely appeared in public and remained in mourning following the death of her son. She did not entertain guests during the first year of her husband's presidency and remained secluded in her living quarters. As first lady, she was not often seen with the president and did not attend concerts or public events in the capital. Pierce became known as the "Shadow of the House," and when she did serve as hostess, she was known to be lethargic and uninspired.⁶⁰ Another shadow of the White House, Eliza Johnson, spent most of her time sewing, knitting and reading. Throughout her entire tenure in public life she appeared only twice: once at an 1866 celebration for Hawaii's Queen Emma and the other at a children's ball in 1868 given in honor of the president's birthday.⁶¹ Lastly, Bess Truman's unwillingness to grant interviews to the press labeled her "unsophisticated." Congressman Adam Clayton Powell even suggested that she was the "last" rather than the first lady for her disdain to appear as the presidential hostess.⁶²

Unlike the other hidden first ladies, Jacqueline Kennedy maintained a different reaction from the public. A popular icon, Kennedy did not take an active part in her husband's presidency and rarely made any formal remarks. Reporters were often frustrated at her distance and noncooperation with the press and yet they showered her

with positive press coverage. Lastly, Laura Bush contained that straightforward, no nonsense disposition similar to her famous mother-in-law that helped her throughout Bush's public life. For the majority of the tenure she was hidden and only publicly engaged for events that contributed to her literacy campaign.⁶³

By and large, Letitia Tyler, Margaret Taylor, Jane Pierce, Eliza Johnson, Bess Truman, Jacqueline Kennedy, and Laura Bush remained uninvolved during their husband's term in office. Although some of these first ladies engaged in small projects, they largely remained within the private sphere. Even though the latter two were not involved in any policy-making, they are still deemed as two of the most-liked first ladies of the twentieth century.

All forty-six first ladies have endured public criticism during their tenure in the White House. Whether their behavior was too powerful for their time or they engaged in a political or social scandal, engaged in too much shopping, or were not engaged at all, these women faced difficult challenges. As public women, their every move was accounted for and judged. As Michelle Obama moves through her first lady position she must overcome similar challenges of her predecessors in addition to some of her own. Obama, a first lady to mark presidential spouse history with a new "first," must overcome the historical stereotypes of African American women.

Stereotypes of African American women

Over the centuries, African American women have endured numerous challenges. One of the most difficult problems they have had to overcome in the last century is the

continuous use of negative stereotypes or cultural images. Although it may seem that the nation has moved beyond racism through its elected African American president, stereotypes still exist. Whether these clichés are positive or negative, they limit the range of human behaviors. Critical Race Theory (CRT) can explain the current tensions between races.

The CRT movement began in the mid-1970s when lawyers, social activists, and legal scholars such as Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, and Richard Delgado drew on critical legal studies and radical feminism to construct a new theory that dealt with racial tensions.⁶⁴ Bell was mostly concerned with highlighting a new theory that would reveal the subtler forms of racism.⁶⁵ As Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic explain, CRT scholars are interested in “studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power.”⁶⁶ The movement encompasses similar issues that many of the civil rights and ethnic discourses are concerned with, but CRT aims to place the issues in a broader, more contemporary perspective that includes history, economics, and context.

CRT scholars argue that the American race problem is grounded upon the belief that individual, institutional, and societal filters tolerate unequal resources available to privileged whites and subordinated blacks. Despite the election of an African American president, African Americans are still largely underrepresented in many professional fields such as law, politics, and academia.⁶⁷ In Congress for example, African Americans encompass approximately 9.5% of the House of Representatives while only six African Americans have served in the Senate. Thus, the majority of Congress is still white and holds positions of power.

Roy L. Brooks explains that the most important contribution to post-civil rights theory is to shed light that the “unflinching insistence that white hegemony, even though it may not be motivated by racial hatred or have an identifiable perpetrator, is every bit a pernicious, or racist, as the ‘white only’ signs hung over Mr. Smith’s restaurant during Jim Crow.”⁶⁸ Even though contemporary racism may be less overt, it is still present. To put it simply, it is more difficult to recognize racism when you see it today.

Although the majority of the research on CRT revolves around black men, more recent efforts have focused on the intersection of race and gender. Although racism and sexism have traditionally been separate realms of study, the experiences of African American women are receiving new attention. As Kimberle Williams Crenshaw explains, many experiences black women face are not included within the traditional boundaries of race or gender discrimination which creates the intersection of racism and sexism in current scholarship.⁶⁹

Ultimately, black women’s lives cannot be understood wholly by examining race and gender separately. Crenshaw argues though, that black women’s unique experiences of being both black and female often define and confine the interests of the entire group. For example, racism is experienced by African Americans who are of a particular gender—male—which determines the antiracist strategies, just as sexism is experienced by women of a particular race—white. Crenshaw points out that the problem is not simply that both of these strategies fail women of color by “not acknowledging the ‘additional’ issue of race and of patriarchy,” but that the scholarly literature is “inadequate even to the discrete tasks of articulating the full dimensions of racism and sexism.”⁷⁰ Crenshaw concludes that because African American women experience racism

differently than African American males and sexism differently than white women, antiracism and feminism research are limited. It is important however to address that historically, African American women have been largely limited in opportunities and subjected to boundless of stereotypes.

When Maria W. Stewart dared to speak in 1832 before a mixed audience of men and women, she faced hostility for deviating from her domestic place.⁷¹ African American studies scholar, K. Sue Jewell explains that for the majority, the cultural images that symbolize African American womanhood have been defined as negative by scholars due to the portrayal of black American women “as the antithesis of the American conception of beauty, femininity and womanhood.”⁷² K. Sue Jewell explains that stereotypes are extremely masculinizing of African American women by assigning them physical attributes and emotional qualities largely attributed to males.⁷³ Elizabeth Hadley Freyberg explains that the “exaggerated images” depicted in film as representative of black women are those of *prostitutes* – women who sell their bodies for monetary profit; *concubines* – women who are kept, usually by a White men; *whores* – sexually promiscuous women who do not profit financially but who appear to enjoy sleeping around; and *bitches* – sexually emasculating, razor-tongued and razor-toting, hostile, aggressive women who will fight a man or woman at the slightest provocation.⁷⁴ These stereotypes have developed through time. Research reveals three dominant African American women stereotypes: the Mammy, Sapphire, and Jezebel. These cultural images are still present today. In early 2011, Melissa Harris-Perry, professor of political science, identified a new cultural image to encompass the contemporary African American

woman, that being “the strong black woman.” Prior to the “strong black woman” construct though there was the Mammy.

Mammy

The cultural image of the Mammy originated during slavery in the South and began to permeate throughout the entire U.S, projecting characteristics of submissiveness towards her owner or employer.⁷⁵ Her relationship with African Americans, especially men, is displayed by aggressiveness and physical features associated with masculinity. Although female slaves performed various tasks including domestic duties inside the home and duties outside in the plantation, the function of “domesticity” remains the foundation for imagery that symbolizes African American womanhood. K. S. Jewell believes that the Mammy serves to challenge those who argue that slavery was harsh and demeaning by depicting female slaves as happy and content with their role. After all, they were merely assuming the domestic role culturally assigned to their gender.⁷⁶

As far as aesthetics are concerned, the Mammy is portrayed as an obese African American woman of very dark complexion with extremely large breasts and buttocks and a flash of shining white teeth visible from her grin.⁷⁷ She typically wears a drab calico dress or a type of domestic uniform and a headscarf or head rag. Her surprisingly large features place her outside the sphere of sexual desirability and into the realm of maternal nurturance which made it more believable that when slave owners were sexually involved with female slaves that it was the result of sexual advances from the female slave rather than the slave owner. Aside from her womanly features, her emotional character is portrayed as masculine, fierce, independent, aggressive and powerful. When her behavior

oversteps the boundaries, however, she is quickly reprimanded and reminded of her status.⁷⁸ Similar to the Mammy stereotype, the Aunt Jemima cultural image portrays a large woman and evolved from the Mammy image but is not as popular in contemporary texts. The main difference between the two is that Aunt Jemima was restricted to the duties of a cook.⁷⁹

Sapphire

The Sapphire image, unlike other stereotypes, requires the presence of an African American male. When the Sapphire image is depicted, it is the African American male who represents the point of conflict, in a continuous verbal debate between the Sapphire and the African American man.⁸⁰ Her presence is based on the corrupt African American man whose lack of integrity and use of cunning and trickery provides her with an opportunity to emasculate him through her use of verbal put-downs. The most notable characteristic of Sapphire is her “sassiness” which is exceeded only by her verbosity. She is also noted for spouting her opinion in an animated, loud manner and her intense expressiveness and hands-on-hip, finger-pointing style. Thus, Sapphire is viewed as comedic and is never taken seriously. The Sapphire image however, has no specific physical features other than the fact that her complexion is usually dark brown.

Jezebel

As the Mammy and Aunt Jemima images were modified through the century, there was an increase in portrayal of the Jezebel.⁸¹ The Jezebel or also known as the bad-black girl was portrayed as a mixed race or fair-skinned African American woman who possessed European features such as thin lips, long straight hair and a thin figure. The

Jezebel was depicted as a promiscuous, alluring seductress out to fulfill the sexual objectification of womanhood.⁸² As a reinforcer of the cultural stereotype regarding the hyper-sexuality of African American women, the bad-black girl was a demoralized sex object. Black women were brought by white men to America to work in the agrarian South and to breed a larger slave population to supplement the workforce with free labor.⁸³ The cultural image was constructed to invalidate the rumors and beliefs that slave owners had an interest in female slaves beyond the manual labor. Ultimately, the bad-black girl became a symbol of African American women who were eager, available and willing sexual partners.⁸⁴

Strong Black Woman

It might be odd to believe that the negative cultural images of the Mammy, Sapphire, and Jezebel still exist today but as Melissa Harris-Perry explains, half-naked women are degraded in hip-hop videos that reinforce the image of black women's lewdness.⁸⁵ Some black women actors willingly accept movie roles that portray them as the degrading Mammy, and black women are still perceived as irrationally angry. Fox News contributor Cal Thomas openly discussed Michelle Obama through comparison of other African American women by questioning the personas of current African American women:

“Look at the image of angry black women on television. Politically you have Maxine Waters of California, liberal, Democrat. She's always angry every time she gets on television. Cynthia McKinney another angry black woman. And who are the black women you see on the local news at night in cities all over the

country. They're usually angry about something. They've had a son who has been shot in a drive-by shooting. They are angry at Bush. So you don't really have a profile of non-angry black woman..."⁸⁶

For the sake of counteracting the negative comments, Harris-Perry has identified the "strong black woman" as the contemporary African American woman cultural image.

Harris-Perry details the strong black woman as a motivated, hardworking breadwinner who suppresses her emotional needs while anticipating those of others.⁸⁷ The strong black woman serves as a constructive role model because black women draw encouragement and self-assurance from an icon able to overcome great obstacles. She offers hope to people who often face difficult circumstances such as herself.⁸⁸ Harris-Perry explains that through the new cultural image, African American women help craft the expectation that "they should be autonomously responsible and self-denying caregivers in their homes and communities."⁸⁹ Harris-Perry adds that the African American women are subject not only to historically rooted racist and sexist characterizations of black women as a group but also to the unrealistic intra-racial expectations that construct black women as "unshakeable, unassailable, and naturally strong."⁹⁰ Any mistake or bad call is translated into a global sense of failure however, exposing black women to more opportunities for shame in the public sphere.

Given these connections with negative stereotypes, we should not be surprised to find that this myth has political consequences.⁹¹ The Mammy stereotype has historical significance because of the occupations of African American women until the 1960s and even today. The present assumption about these women is that their most valuable

functions are reserved in service occupations, especially as domestics.⁹² The stereotypes of African American women make it very difficult for the “strong black woman” to be taken into consideration. Even though the “strong black woman” provides a more positive image than the Mammy, Sapphire or Jezebel, she is still restricted from the benefits of full recognition.⁹³

The Mammy, Sapphire, and Jezebel stereotypes illustrate African American women as overly obese mothers, angry black women, or hyper-sexualized seductresses. Ultimately, these stereotypes frame the notion of black womanhood and the image of Michelle Obama. As contemporary African American women aim to challenge the ugly history behind them, they face a future that does not forget.

Rhetorical Problems of Michelle Obama

As a first lady and an African American woman, Michelle Obama must face the criticism that previous first ladies have had to overcome and rise above the stereotypes of African American women. Obama must overcome the criticisms of the first ladyship as well as the African American stereotypes that black women have endured. The two sections that follow detail examples of the first lady’s criticism attributed to her first lady position and those directly related to her African American race. These two sections combined exemplify the rhetorical problems Obama faces as she enters the public sphere.

Michelle Obama as the First Lady

Michelle Obama, a former lawyer and hospital executive, was accustomed to bringing home a paycheck that exceeded her husband’s Senate salary, but decided to put

that aside for the presidential spouse position. Apparently comfortable with idea of putting her own career on hold, she caused feminists to squirm as she admitted “to a more than a casual interest in fashion and delighted in describing herself as a ‘Mom-in-Chief’” as first lady scholar Betty Boyd Caroli explained.⁹⁴ Unlike Hillary Clinton, the only other attorney to become First Lady, she felt no need to separate her role as presidential spouse from cookie baking and as Boyd Caroli put it: “[her] willingness to combine professional expertise and a traditional woman’s role marked something new.”⁹⁵ With a 2007 family income estimated at \$4.2 million, the Obamas don’t seem to be part of the struggling American households that comprise many African American families.⁹⁶

Michelle Obama’s critics have made a point about both her physical appearance and her political role in the “Let’s Move” campaign. Opponents of the anti-obesity campaign have denounced her attempt to create a healthier living for children and have criticized Obama’s physique as a hypocritical contrast between what the first lady says and what is actually enacted. The contradiction between the expectations for the first lady and her campaign once again reveal the constant struggle to understand what the public requires of the first lady.

Various magazines and newspapers have described Michelle Obama as a physically different first lady. *Vogue* magazine for example, describes her as having an “uncommon figure for an American First lady, due to her long, lean, athletic frame.”⁹⁷ Such magazines often compare Obama to her predecessors since she “isn’t cut from the... [same] cloth as other first ladies.”⁹⁸ The *Chicago Tribune* attributes it to her “buff biceps” revealed by the sleeveless dresses she favors.⁹⁹ Popular satirical newstories express headlines such as the “Sleevegate,” “The Right to Bare Arms,” and the “Upper

Body Stimulus Plan,” which leads to the suggestion that more coverage is necessary to portray an American first lady.¹⁰⁰ Never in the history of first ladies has the question of “is she showing too much skin” been repeated. Jodi Kantor of *The New York Times*, complains about Obama’s sleeveless dresses in the month of February. According to Kantor, the first lady’s sleeveless dress for the cover of *Vogue*, sleeveless ensemble when discussing the menu for the White House kitchen, and sleeveless dress in the House chamber for her husband’s first address to Congress are the points of concern for Obama’s “inappropriate look.”¹⁰¹ The physical standards by which Obama is being measured are gendered but also surprisingly classed, which McAllister attributes to the public’s anxiety over the sight of muscular arms which are fit for “menial labor” not for the display in the political arena.¹⁰²

Additionally, numerous articles contrast Michelle Obama’s “populist” style with Nancy Reagan’s “formal” style and Barbara Bush’s “disciplined decorum” and question Obama’s capacity to move “gracefully” into her role as “America’s hostess.” The *Los Angeles Times* affirms the role of first ladies as hostesses by explaining that they rise and fall on important details such as the “selection of the ‘menus’ and ‘china’.”¹⁰³ Reports of Obama’s White House etiquette note that her taste for “mean waffle and grits” rather than the traditional White House cuisine, along with her mix of “three different china patterns for her first formal dinner” raises questions about how the public will perceive her as a presidential hostess. Her international etiquette has also been questioned during foreign trips. Very similar to Edith Wilson’s criticism, in April of 2009, Michelle Obama did not follow royal protocol and hugged Queen Elizabeth of England causing a major stir in England about her informal manners.¹⁰⁴ The following November, Michelle Obama

shook hands with a conservative Muslim minister, which violated Muslim expectations for contact between the sexes. The minister blamed the First Lady for the violation of his religious vows.

Similar to previous first ladies, Michelle Obama endured heavy public criticism when she recently vacationed with her youngest daughter, Sasha, and a group of friends in Southern Spain. Andrea Tantaros from the *New York Daily News* criticized the first lady for traveling abroad when destinations within the states would help the U.S. economy.¹⁰⁵ Right-wing conservatives were enraged about how much the first lady's lavish trip would cost tax-payers. Tantaros explained that Michelle Obama's trip and glitzy destination with accommodations at 5-star resorts "contrasted with President Obama's demonization of the rich that smacks hypocrisy and perpetuates a disconnect between the country and its leaders."¹⁰⁶ Critics even compared her to Marie Antoinette by grafting a picture of Michelle Obama's face on the famous 1775 portrait of the Queen of France.¹⁰⁷ A few changes were made which included exposing one of the first lady's toned arms and having her point to a location on the globe rather than just resting her hand on top. The image read the caption: "Choosing the next vacation," highlighting criticism that the need for Secret Service protection was tax-funded. Similar comparisons between the Queen and first lady claimed that the people were initially charmed by her beauty, but she was accused of being profligate when people financially struggled during the hardships of the 1780s and comparably to the present recession. Peter Baker and Rafael Minder of the *New York Times* explain that Laura Bush often took vacations traveling with her Secret Service agents to meet friends for camping in national parks.¹⁰⁸ Those trips never generated much criticism however, in part because vacationing in the

U.S. is not as politically delicate as American leaders and their families flying to foreign countries for down-time.

Shortly after the Spain trip, Michelle Obama was photographed leaving a Target store which the press attributed to a publicity stunt to counteract the previous claims of the first lady being a reckless spender on lavish vacations. Even though many found the images of the first lady shopping at a discount store, familiar to millions of Americans, delightful and refreshing through headlines such as “First Ladies... They’re just like us,” others explained the story in a different way.¹⁰⁹ Fox News host, Sean Hannity stated, “First Lady Michelle Obama shopping at Target with an AP photographer in tow planned? I think so.”¹¹⁰ Radio talk show host, Rush Limbaugh did not take long to comment on Michelle Obama’s outing as “a phony-baloney plastic banana good-time rock-and-roller optic photo op.” It seems that regardless if the first lady spends her time in extravagant, pricey places or shopping at discount stores, criticism will always follow.

The most criticism Michelle Obama may have received up to this point however, concerns the “Let’s Move” campaign. The anti-childhood obesity campaign has sparked backlash from conservatives who complain that “Let’s Move” is an attempt by the government to control family life through regulation.¹¹¹ Critics have suggested that the child-nutrition legislation she backed in Congress would end school bake sales and her work with the National Restaurant Association to develop healthier menu items is simply a government takeover of business. Political blogger Jeff Winkler explains that while the “Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 sounded like a great idea, the legislation has some gristle.”¹¹² The act consequently gave the USDA “authority to set nutritional standard for all foods regularly sold in schools during the day,” making it unbearable for

parents who think their children should be governed by the smallest bureaucracy possible.

Critics of “Let’s Move” are counteracting Michelle Obama’s campaign with a new study that found that “proximity to healthy food doesn’t mean better eating and that people have a ‘complicated relationship’ with their diets” as reported in an online blog by Jeff Winkler.¹¹³ To support this study, the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA) has expressed concerns against “Let’s Move” as an initiative to unfairly “single out fat kids, turning them into targets.”¹¹⁴ Conservative blogger, Jenny Erikson contends that the “incredibly insulting” efforts by Michelle Obama will not change the eating habits of overweight Americans.¹¹⁵ Many critics believe that she should not have personalized the issue and tied her daughters into the cause because it does not portray a positive self-image for the girls.¹¹⁶ Laura Collins Lyster-Mensh, an eating disorder activist and Executive Director of Families Empowered and Supporting Treatment of Disorder (F.E.A.S.T), explains that parents do not need government messages about dieting for their children. These messages lead to catastrophic events much larger than obesity as she explains that “dieting is a gateway drug to eating disorders for those with a biological predisposition to eating disorders.”¹¹⁷ Consequently, the majority of concerns regarding “Let’s Move” reveal the public’s fear of government control in the kitchens. The criticisms however didn’t just stop in the kitchen; they found themselves in the streets. Critics suggested that the “Let’s Move” campaign was endangering people, blaming an increase in pedestrian deaths on the first lady’s campaign. Evidently, Americans were putting themselves at risk by walking more in attempts to partake in “Let’s Move.”¹¹⁸

Critics attempt to make Michelle Obama look hypocritical for advocating healthy eating habits but exercising the opposite. When the first lady attended the opening of “Shake Shack” in Washington D.C., she did not expect her meal choice to spark such controversy. Rush Limbaugh commented on his talk show that the first lady is “a hypocrite for dining on ribs,” and remarked about her not-so-narrow waistline. Congressman Jim Sensenbrenner said that the first lady “should practice what she preaches with her ‘Let’s Move’ campaign, promoting healthy eating and exercise habits; she lectures us on eating right while she has a large posterior herself.”¹¹⁹ Plainly enough, denunciation of the first lady’s campaign was not sufficient and went beyond to comment on her physical appearance as an attack. Once again reinforcing the notion that the public’s irregular expectations make the role of the first lady all that more difficult to fulfill.

In addition to the “Let’s Move” campaign’s attempt to provide children with healthier food options, the campaign promotes breastfeeding due to current research that found that children who are breast-fed are less likely to become obese.¹²⁰ Since then, several conservatives have publicly declared that breastfeeding should not be promoted by the government. For example, Rep. Michelle Bachmann of Minnesota stated on the Laura Ingraham show that “the first lady’s breastfeeding promotion represents a ‘hard left’ position in which ‘government is the answer to everything.’”¹²¹ Bachmann went further to compare the breastfeeding campaign to “social engineering” and the negative perception of mothers who choose not to breastfeed their children. Every aspect of the “Let’s Move” campaign was criticized as the administration’s attempt to become “Big Brother” in a social issue that was largely beyond government’s jurisdiction.

Aime Parnes of *Politico* explains that during the first two years of the Obama administration, Michelle was “more Laura Bush rather than Hillary Clinton, but that has begun to change.”¹²² Conservative critics such as Parnes, however, are now making attacks on the first lady because “she is playing an increasingly political role in her husband’s administration.”¹²³ Political strategist Mark McKinnon proposes that “if the first lady doesn’t want criticism, then she shouldn’t propose policy,”¹²⁴ as a cautionary notice that the first lady is overstepping her American hostess position. Myra Gutin, an expert on first ladies at Rider University explains the criticism of Michelle Obama is close to inappropriate. According to Gutin, the only other first lady to be as consistently criticized as Obama was Hillary Rodham Clinton for tackling health care during her husband’s administration. Hillary Clinton’s campaign however, “was a bureaucracy of her own,” making it quite different from Michelle Obama’s campaign. In contrast, Nancy Reagan’s “Just Say No” campaign was criticized as a “less-than-aggressive response by the White House to mounting drug use.”¹²⁵ In either case, first ladies are condemned if they enact too much control and condemned when they don’t enact enough. Criticisms of this sort make it even more difficult to determine the amount of authority needed in first lady’s social campaigns.

Michelle Obama as an African American woman

The criticism Michelle Obama receives as a first lady is similar to that of her predecessors; however, no previous presidential spouse has endured criticism regarding her race. The only other time in history when a first lady’s race was under observation was when Florence Harding was accused of being part black. The current first lady’s full African American roots leave the media to speculate among other things, stereotype.

Michelle Obama's family roots became the subject of discussion in late 2009 as genealogist Megan Smolenyak examined Obama's heritage.¹²⁶ The first lady's great-great-great grandmother, Melvinia Shields, was a slave girl who was given to a South Carolina slave owner. As a young girl, she was impregnated by a white man, and gave birth to a mixed-race child. The findings validated the long-standing rumors that Obama had a white ancestor, highlighting the complex history of racial intermingling, often a result of rape that bases the bloodlines of many African Americans. The common stereotypes of African Americans became present during the 2008 presidential election as the Obama's presence aimed to challenge those racial clichés.

During the presidential campaign season, Michelle Obama's comment that for the first time in her adult lifetime she was really proud of her country, stirred the initial racial remark towards the then-candidate's wife. Obama's comment was seen as a bitter remark towards a white-dominated society and the *National Review* ran a cover, labeling her "Mrs. Grievance."¹²⁷ The image was a harsh mischaracterization of black womanhood, portraying the Obama as a Jim Crow era caricature.¹²⁸ The article claimed that Michelle Obama was a "mix of privilege and victimology which is not where most Americans live."¹²⁹ Furthermore, the comment was received as evidence of her lack of patriotism.¹³⁰ The article aimed to describe her as a bitter black woman and "different" than common America, which was often the basis of the Sapphire stereotype. Jeffrey Alexander, professor of Sociology, explains that the underlying theme of the numerous criticisms was that Obama was "no longer behaving in a traditional, ladylike way."¹³¹ Alexander reports that prior to Obama's "proud" remark, she was seen as the new, glorified Jacqueline Kennedy with stories revolving around her wardrobe and pearls. Following

that remark though, it was suggested that critics should no longer “treat her with kid gloves.”¹³² Thus, Obama’s “proud” remark would open the gate for public criticism due to her alleged inability to act like a lady.

Jodi Kantor, a reporter from the *New York Times*, recently published a book entitled “The Obamas,” explaining a power struggle between the East Wing (first lady’s office) and the West Wing (oval office). The book describes the first lady in dispute with the former White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel and former press secretary and presidential advisor Robert Gibbs. When interviewed on CBS News about the allegations that Obama was overstepping the political boundaries allotted to presidential spouses, Obama reignited one of the original African American stereotypes. The first lady stated “That’s been an image people have tried to paint of me since the day Barack announced, that I’m some kind of angry black woman.”¹³³ Many speculated about the first lady’s choice to use the “angry black woman” or Sapphire stereotype, herself. In using the phrases she did, reporters Niall Stange and Amie Parnes said that she risked reactivating the criticism that had surrounded her during the “Mrs. Grievance” debacle.

For those that hadn’t thought of Obama as an “angry black woman,” this was the opportunity to start. David Webb, a conservative radio talk show host and Tea Party activist stated following Obama’s CBS interview that “she comes from a very angry, black nationalist background.”¹³⁴ He explained that Obama came from a modest family, full of great opportunities but due to her role in the White House, she should be cautious of her behavior given “you have to couch your views, because you’re representing the nation.”¹³⁵ Although, Obama is not the first presidential spouse to challenge the first ladyship role, no other first lady’s behavior has been attributed to her race. To claim

Sarah Polk, Nancy Reagan, and Hillary Clinton as “angry white women” for their powerful exercises as presidential spouses would be foolish and yet such labels go unchallenged when addressing African American women such as Michelle Obama.

Even though criticism surrounded the “Let’s Move” campaign’s supposed aggressive “Big Brother” agenda, feminists differed in their views. While many women’s rights activists hoped for a more policy-driven agenda to undertake an independent political role in the Obama administration, they were upset with her selection of motherhood as her primary role in the White House; often criticized as conforming to restrictive gender norms. Melissa Harris-Perry however explained Obama’s Mom-in-Chief persona as a strategy to portray African American motherhood in a better light.¹³⁶ Harris-Perry explains that Obama’s Mom-in-Chief role challenged the old discourse of black women as bad mothers. Historically, African American women did not have control over their children, given they could be sold at any time without their consent or brutally punished without their ability to defend their children. In today’s society black mothers are often deemed as “crack mothers, welfare queens, and matriarchs of fatherless families,” furthering the discourse that black women are bad mothers.¹³⁷ Through this perspective, Obama’s ability to claim her daughters challenges the negative images of black motherhood. As Harris-Perry explains, calling Michelle Obama into the Mom-in-Chief role, calls her to serve as the national Mammy.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Michelle Obama’s struggles in her role trace back to centuries ago. These struggles she shares with the forty-six first ladies before her and millions of

African American women who have endured negative stereotypes since the inception of the nation. Although history has not been so kind, Obama moves into the political arena as the first African American first lady who must try to overcome the rhetorical problems with which she is presented. She faces numerous criticisms for a too-fierce agenda, while others expect her to crusade a more policy-driven social cause within her husband's administration. Ultimately, she is criticized for every move, simply because she is a woman in the public sphere. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell explains that first ladies have been disadvantaged in joining the public and private spheres.¹³⁸ The strong disadvantages concern the difficulty in attending to the first lady role and the criticisms associated with the high-profile position. Campbell also asserts that first ladies face almost impossible rhetorical problems which arise out of "an expectation that they are to represent what we pretend is a single universally accepted ideal for U.S. womanhood."¹³⁹ As we move closer to Obama's "Let's Move" speech texts, these rhetorical problems will help shed light into her Mom-in-Chief persona as a way to identify with her created or constitutive audience.

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CHAPTER 3

Theoretical Considerations

Dexter B. Gordon, professor of Communication Studies and African American studies, characterizes rhetoric as an “ideological discourse in process, constantly responsive to the exigencies of the contingent situations in which it operates.”¹ Rhetoric, in this sense, is an endless battle to overcome urgent obstacles with which the rhetor is presented. Michelle Obama’s rhetoric in the “Let’s Move” campaign is a constant struggle to overcome the rhetorical problems she faces. As discussed in the previous chapter, she shares the rhetorical problems of previous first ladies, along with the stereotypes African American women face. Obama’s speeches in the “Let’s Move” campaign, exemplify the attempt to rise above the problems she confronts.

Preliminary analysis of Obama’s “Let’s Move” campaign speeches revealed two rhetorical strategies she uses in effort to overcome her rhetorical problems. First, Obama adopts the persona of the Mom-in-Chief throughout her campaign. That persona allows her to draw on a powerful image of the archetypal mother. The use of the archetypal mother enables her to transcend racial and social boundaries, which is necessary when she faces such rhetorical problems associated with race and gender. Second, her identification with American families enables her to unify and create her audience through constitutive rhetoric. Thus, a methodological explanation of those rhetorical strategies is necessary to understand Obama’s “Let’s Move” campaign speeches. This chapter details theoretical considerations of the rhetorical persona which sheds light into

C.G. Jung's archetypal mother, is further enhanced by Kenneth Burke's use of identification as a tool to create what Maurice Charland calls a "constitutive audience."

Persona

The concept of persona can be traced back to the performing arts in ancient Greece and Rome. In Latin literature, persona is described as a "mask" or "false face," covering the faces of actors.² The masks portrayed a particular character or persona existing apart from the individual performer. Thus, putting on the masks transformed the actor into the character. Robert Elliott states that although the precise history of the word cannot be pinned down, "there is no question that, in Latin, persona refers originally to a device of transformation and concealment on the theatrical stage."³ The term persona gradually acquired other meanings beyond its initial definition of "theatrical mask," among them the notion of "role," both in a dramaturgical sense and in the broader sense of a social role.

Robert Langbaum, professor of American literature, explains that persona implies the existence of a "mask that is required by the mythical pattern, the ritual, and the plot; the mask that is there before any person turn up to fill it."⁴ In rhetorical theory, the persona is not the rhetor himself or herself, but the attributed character created through the symbolic construction of persona. As Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Thomas R. Burkholder explain, that persona is the role a speaker takes in order to achieve a strategic purpose, often reached through the use of language.⁵ As Campbell and Burkholder add, "rhetors may take on particular identities or roles to strategically enhance their persuasive influence," through enhanced credibility or ethos.⁶

Ultimately, the strategically chosen persona increases the perceived credibility and persuasiveness of the speaker. Edwin Black extends the notion of credibility to discuss that,

It is common knowledge that the discussion of moral character – ethos – in the *Rhetoric* is for many reasons an intriguing account, that the discussion of intellectual character – dianoia – which appears mainly in the *Poetics* is cryptic and evidently incomplete in the form in which we have distinguishable but complementary constituents of the same thing. They are aspects of the psyche. In a play their tokens suggest to the audience the psyche of a character. In a speech they suggest the speaker.⁷

In this sense, when a speaker assumes a particular role or persona, the audience grants that speaker the moral or intellectual authority associated with that persona. Black extends the construct of persona to a “second persona” to include the value of the audience in the rhetorical message.

In 1970, Black introduced the “second persona” or “implied auditor” to enable the critic to make ethical judgments about the text. The “second persona” is implied by the discourse and the rhetor characterizes the audience in that way. Black explains that the implied auditor “is sometimes sitting in judgment of the past, sometimes of the present, and sometimes of the future,” depending on the discourse.⁸ The speech for example, “may imply an elderly auditor or a youthful one. More recently we have learned that the second persona may be favorably or unfavorably disposed toward the thesis of the

discourse, or he [sic] may have a neutral attitude toward it.”⁹ Critics find clues regarding the second persona within the text created by the rhetor. For example, a critic may...

[e]xamine a discourse and say... ‘This is designated for a hostile audience.’ We would be claiming nothing about those who attended the discourse. Indeed, perhaps our statement concerns a closet speech, known to no one except ourselves as critics and its author. But we are able nonetheless to observe the sort of audience that would be appropriate to it. We should have derived from the discourse a hypothetical construct that is the implied auditor.¹⁰

Therefore, the second persona can be viewed in the desired audience. The speaker must assess the type of audience he/she wishes to address and construct the desired persona for the audience members.

Ultimately, the rhetorical construction of persona reveals the act of impersonation by the speaker for the purpose of enhancing credibility and persuasiveness. William M. Keith and Christian O. Lundberg, professors of Communication Studies explain that the audience, however, is related in the discourse through the second persona which means that the people that make up the audience at the beginning of the speech “take on another identity that the speaker convinces them to inhabit through the course of the speech itself.”¹¹ However, when the speaker’s identity forms such a strong connection with a classical persona or archetype which leads the audience to think of no one but that original persona, then the speaker has further increased their persuasiveness. If a rhetor has constructed a strong persona which contributes the audience to associate the rhetor with a classical image, they have created an archetypal persona.

Archetypes

To understand archetypes, Langbaum explains that the individual concept of the self is a social construction; it “exists outside us in the form of cultural symbols. In assimilating ourselves therefore, to those symbols or roles or archetypes, we do not lose the self but find it.”¹² Therefore, when rhetors adopt an archetype, they conform to a universally-agreed persona. The archetypal figure extends from the rhetorical construct of persona to explain a standard or prototype role that a speaker adopts. According to B.L. Ware and Wil A. Linkugel, the rhetorical persona is a reflection of the “aspirations and cultural visions of audiences from which stems the symbolic construction of archetypal figures.”¹³ Ultimately, the archetype is a prototype or original pattern from which copies are made and form a memorable significance towards the audience.

As Mark Greene states, “to say that something is archetypal means that it is ‘typical’ for all human beings.”¹⁴ Steven Walker helps round the definition of archetype by explaining that “it designates an unconscious element of the instinctual structure of the human psyche.”¹⁵ To put this into a larger perspective, Anthony Stevens says:

All cultures contain universals that are distinctly human in expression. In fact, no human culture is known that lacks laws about property, procedures for settling disputes, rules governing courtship, marriage, and adultery, taboos relating to food and incest, rules of etiquette... the performance of funeral rites, belief in the supernatural, religious rituals, the recital of myths... and so on.¹⁶

These examples are evidence of archetypes at work. Stevens clarifies that what anyone experiences in life is not merely determined by our personal histories. It is fundamentally

“guided by the collective history of the human species as a whole,” and that collective history is encoded in the collective unconscious.¹⁷

The archetype, according to C.G. Jung explains how symbols give meaning to our lives. Archetypes are the original images formed by the repetitive experiences in human lives, inherited through the collective unconscious of the human race.¹⁸ As Jung puts it, the archetype is a “latent disposition towards certain identical reactions.”¹⁹ In other words, archetypes are images that are transformed into typical emotional attitudes or action patterns. Ordinarily, the archetypes are transmitted and experienced through the unconscious projection of their images on other people, and when awareness of the unconscious is weakest, the effects of the archetypes are strongest. As Jung notes, “When a situation occurs which corresponds to a given archetype, that archetype becomes activated and a compulsiveness appears, which like an instinctual drive, gains its way against all reason and will.”²⁰ The archetypes act independently of the audience’s will or desire and when the audience is identified with an archetypal group, the archetype functions like a separate personality that controls the behavior. Archetypes however are not limited to certain contexts or groups; they can present themselves potentially anywhere and everywhere.

An archetype exists in history, myth, or literature and has gained prominence in the minds of the audience and as Ware and Linkugel explain, those rhetors who remind the audience of the archetype will gain additional credibility as leaders.²¹ Ultimately, when the speaker’s adopted character becomes so closely associated with the perceived set of human experiences or ideas that it becomes almost impossible for the audience to think anyone other than the archetype, then that speaker stands in “a symbolic

relationship” to those experiences or ideas. Furthermore, if the audience mentally assigns to the speaker the qualities of an archetypal form, the rhetorical persona assumes “inherent persuasive connotations deep within the cultural psyche of that audience.”²² The formed symbolic relationship between rhetor and audience enhances credibility.

Mother Archetype

Michelle Obama’s persona specifically, assumes the mother archetype as a strategy aimed at increasing credibility in the “Let’s Move” campaign. The mother archetype, as Sara Ruddick argues, is grounded in maternal work, the work a mother carries out while raising a child. Maternal work has three facets, according to Ruddick, which include caring for the child physically, nurturing the child emotionally, cognitively and spiritually, and training the child socially, the central purpose of which is “reserving the lives of children.”²³ Jack Lule’s description of the archetypal mother, as she appears in the news media, merges with Ruddick’s concept of maternal work. According to Lule, the ideal good mother offers care and protection for her children, is gentle, kind, giving, and is a model for others.²⁴ On a similar note, Sarah Bowman identifies the archetypal mother with the following characteristics: nurturing, directive, helpful, and patient, willing to make sacrifices, supportive, organizing, and facilitating maturity.²⁵

Within the mother archetype however, dwells the anxiety of survival in early states of life, the human child is completely dependent on the mother figure for nourishment and protection. The power that the archetypal mother exerts is best described by Jerome Bernstein. He states that

(She) is life and psyche in one; (she) gives nourishment and pleasure, protects and warms, comforts, and forgives. (She) is the refuge for all suffering, the goal of all desire. For always this mother is she who fulfills, the bestower and helper. This living image of the Great and Good Mother has at all times of distress been the refuge of humanity and ever shall be: for the state of being contained in the whole, without responsibility or effort... is paradisaical.²⁶

Thus, Bernstein's definition of archetypal mother parallels the characteristics that Lule and Bowman provide to describe the classic mother persona.

The most important assumption of the mother archetype is its transcendence through cultural, historical, political, racial, and religious boundaries. As Lynne Stearney explains, motherhood is an enduring ideal. The assumptions about motherhood and images that underlie the public's understanding of motherhood "cross historical periods, social conditions, and cultural boundaries."²⁷ This concept is to be found in practically every religion and mythology whose contents have come to our knowledge . . . It is indeed strange that legends which have taken their origin so far apart should yet be so similar.²⁸ James Chesebro, Dale Bertelsen, and Thomas Gencarelli add that "because of its pervasive and cross-cultural nature, motherhood can be understood as an archetype, or a symbol which transcends particular situations and constructs."²⁹ Therefore, archetypes exert rhetorical power as universal symbols through their cross cultural meanings.

Ultimately, the mother archetype is a powerful means of communicating the importance of caring relationships and selfless devotion throughout cultures. This archetype casts the mother as a symbolic state, characterizing women's instinct for caretaking and nurturance as essentially a natural phenomenon, while encompassing the

female psychological aptitude for limitless love and self-sacrifice.³⁰ Thus, from the perspective of the archetypal ideal of motherhood, women are first and foremost mothers, and their manifest destiny is tied to their ability to both produce children and to foster their healthy development.

To place this into a historical perspective, women did not always enter the public sphere successfully by appealing to their inalienable rights. Instead, early “womanhood” feminists constructed arguments for their public involvement upon their special virtues. For example, Frances E. Willard of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) argued that the woman’s right to vote was for “‘home protection,’ as a means for women to rid the home of sins such as alcohol through their ability to nurture.”³¹ Woman’s rights leaders such as Willard built the argument assuring the public that they would maintain their femininity in the form of domestic virtue, but could simultaneously assist in the public sphere.³² Cheryl Jorgensen-Earp concludes that the temperance movement provided the “testing ground for acceptable and visible feminine rhetorical behaviors, forming a mythological foundation for feminine persona through which women could publicly invent themselves.”³³ Due to this testing ground, contemporary women rhetors can employ such archetypes today.

Identification

The mother archetype explains women’s primary role as mothers and their duty to foster their children in healthy environments. If all young children’s healthy development is bound to a universal image of motherhood, who better to represent that role than Mom-in-Chief, Michelle Obama? Consequently, the first lady’s “Let’s Move” rhetorical

campaign exemplifies the mother archetype. Obama's persona is able to reach her audience through what Kenneth Burke calls "identification."

In *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke states that A is not identical to B, "but insofar that their interests are joined, A is identified with B."³⁴ Even if the interests are not shared, A may identify itself with B, if A believes they are, or is persuaded to believe so. Burke's example suggests that the key term is not "persuasion" but rather identification. If persuasion is to occur among audiences, "one party must 'identify' with another. That is, the one who becomes persuaded sees that one party is like another in some way."³⁵ Identification involves making specific features of one's self "consubstantial" with others.

Barbara Biesecker explains that "in the historical moment of identification, the human being 'both is and is not one' with that other," which allows a constant potential for re-articulation.³⁶ As Jason Ingram explains, humans are always closing the gap between self and other; the community is always articulating with and against the norms.³⁷ However, individuals always share their commonalities with others, thus they identify with them. Identification, whether with individuals, associations, or ideas, is never complete, thus consubstantiality with groups, individuals, ideals, and symbols never fully adheres. As Biesecker argues, this lack of cohesion leaves room for change and conflict,

Between the possibility for exchange and an unbroachable estrangement, and by way of a dialectical movement, the social appears not as a perfectly egalitarian

space of cooperation but always and already as a field necessarily fraught with factional strife.³⁸

Thus, complete identification with the audience would make communication unnecessary, given that the rhetor and auditor would no longer need to express ideas or beliefs due to their identical identities and thought processes. As Burke's original notion of "pure persuasion," rhetoric is always in process, in that "a mode of discourse whose continued 'existence' is predicated upon its own perpetual failure or its irreducible inability to achieve its end."³⁹ Ultimately, identification, communication and persuasion are a never-ending process.

People can be identified through their common experiences, ideas, and values and to identify with someone is to make them consubstantial. Persuasion, according to Burke, is the "communication by the signs of consubstantiality, the appeal of identification," which links the rhetor and audience.⁴⁰ However, not all audiences are the same or share common experiences. Thus, creating or constituting the rhetor's audiences can enhance the persuasiveness of the message.

Constitutive Rhetoric

Although Obama's "Let's Move" speech texts reveal that she identifies with her audience as American families, she constitutes her audience by creating them and calling them into being. The audience which Obama is presented with is not a universal audience, but rather a created one. Maurice Charland's construct of constitutive rhetoric helps explain the notion of a created or constitutive audience.

As Dexter Gordon explains, constitutive rhetoric conceives a group of individuals as one. He provides the example that,

settlers from different countries in Europe are presented as a community. Blacks from different tribes and nations in Africa are identified as a 'people.' In both cases, disparate individuals representing a plurality of nationalities, tribes, and cultures are identified as 'one people.' Such a constitution serves to mask and negate the tensions and differences among members of any given society. Not only are differences negated but such a narrative also elides and bridges distinctions between the past and the present. Time is collapsed or compressed as identification occurs in the narrative. In functioning thus, the subject constituted by such rhetorics is not just transhistorical but also transcendent.⁴¹

From the perspective of constitutive rhetoric, the collective "we" emerges as a shifting formation as the audience's identity. The tactic of creating "one people" is effectively achieved through what Charland calls a constitutive audience. According to Charland, constitutive rhetoric does what rhetoric as persuasion cannot do. While persuasion requires an audience that is "already constituted with an identity and within an ideology," it has no way of account for this audience.⁴² The practice of constitutive rhetoric is based on the notion that the audience's identity does not transcend discourses but is fixed by the speeches or other rhetorical texts within they are persuaded to act.⁴³ Charland adds that this practice is especially beneficial when the audience's identity is problematic. In doing so, constitutive rhetoric "permits an understanding within rhetorical theory of ideological discourse, of the discourse that presents itself as always only pointing to the given, the natural, the already agreed upon."⁴⁴

Charland asserts that audiences do not exist apart from the speech by which they are to be persuaded. He criticizes the idea that audiences are free to choose and free to be persuaded. For example, his case study centers on the emergence of the term *Québécois* in the late 1970s among supporters of Quebec sovereignty. In the study, Charland argues that collective identities are constituted through a series of narratives positioning a ‘‘people’’ as subjects within a text.⁴⁵ The analysis demonstrates how public discourse at certain historical times creates subject positions that inescapably contain directives for action. Such political positioning is ideological because it tends to presuppose, rather than lay open, how it has been historically formed and on what values it is founded.⁴⁶ Charland notes that because of the presence of rightness we should be critical of the term persuasion—the language of rightness is not one of choices, and the audience of constitutive.

Burke challenges the notion that an audience exists prior to and outside the realm of rhetoric, which seeks to persuade them. Instead, rhetoric constitutes an audience through the process of identification. In order to persuade your ideas with someone, according to Burke, you must ‘‘identify your way with his [sic].’’⁴⁷ Similarly, constitutive rhetoric illuminates how audiences are created during a moment of utterance. As English professor Katja Thieme explains, constitutive rhetoric clarifies how utterances constitute the range of different audience positions, ‘‘how thereby writers position themselves in relation to these audience groups, and how these groups are expected to act on the writer’s utterance.’’⁴⁸ In a society of manifold utterances, constitutive rhetoric, and thus constitutive audience, brings the process of persona and identification with the audience into a full circle.

Conclusion

In the end, we can conclude that Obama's "Let's Move" campaign speeches exemplify the rhetorical constructs discussed. The Mom-in-Chief persona signifies the mask worn by the rhetor which enables her to select a unique persona to play a virtuoso performance of persuasion. However, when this uniquely chosen persona becomes the forefront of the audience's mind, making it impossible to think of anything other than that archetype, the rhetor has succeeded in developing their credibility. Most importantly, the use of archetypes, specifically the archetypal mother, transcends historical, racial, and cultural boundaries that Michelle Obama faces. Once again, the Mom-in-Chief persona aids in identifying with the common characteristics, experiences and values of the audience. Through the chosen persona, the rhetor thus can become consubstantial or "one" with the audience. The rhetor's identification with the American public creates a constitutive audience or calls the audience into being. The rhetorical constructs of persona and identification shed light into the bigger picture surrounding Michelle Obama's "Let's Move" campaign. These strategies aid us in understanding how Obama constructs her rhetoric in hopes of overcoming the rhetorical problems she faces as the first African American first lady.

Obama's "Let's Move" Launch speech delivered on February 9, 2010, her address at the NAACP convention on July 12, 2010, and her "Let's Move" Anniversary speech delivered on February 9, 2011, mark the area for study. The three speeches collectively shed light into Obama's strategic use of the archetypal mother and constitutive audience as a tool to disembark from the rhetorical problems of previous first ladies and African

American women. A detailed analysis of these three texts as data for the persona and identification follow.

Notes

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- ³ Robert Elliott, *The Literary Persona*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982): 21
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- ⁷ Edwin Black. "The Second Persona." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 56(2), (1970): 111
- ⁸ Black, "The Second Persona," 111
- ⁹ Black, "The Second Persona," 112
- ¹⁰ Black, "The Second Persona," 112
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- ²³ Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*. (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1989): 19
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CHAPTER 4

Analysis of the White House Mom-in-Chief

When addressing a gathering of multi-racial schoolgirls in London, Michelle Obama stated “Although the circumstances of our lives may seem very disengaged, with me standing here as the First Lady of the United States of America and you just getting through school, I want you to know we have very much in common. For nothing in my life’s path would have predicted that I would be standing here as the First African-American First Lady of the United States of America. There’s nothing in my story that would land me here. I wasn’t raised with wealth or resources or any social standing to speak of.”¹ This statement is representative of Obama’s aim to identify with the audience. Along with her aim to establish common ground with the school girls, Obama acknowledges being the first African-American first lady. What may not be as obvious through this statement are the rhetorical problems she encounters, which in some respects are similar to those of previous first ladies, and in other respects are quite different. Along with the criticisms encountered by previous presidential wives, Obama faces the stereotypes African American women have endured since the inception of the nation. However, as the quintessential contemporary black woman, Obama engages in unique rhetorical strategies in her “Let’s Move” campaign in effort to overcome those rhetorical problems.

Michelle Obama’s “Let’s Move” Launch speech delivered on February 9, 2010, her address at the NAACP convention on July 12, 2010, and her “Let’s Move” Anniversary speech delivered on February 9, 2011, marks the area of analysis. These

three texts serve as the major speeches delivered during the first year of the campaign and collectively shed light into Obama's strategic use of the rhetorical persona to form the image surrounding the archetypal mother to promote identification and to create a constitutive audience. The persona and identification strategies work together to overcome the rhetorical problems faced by previous first ladies and African American women.

Persona

In order to create an appropriate First Lady image, Michelle Obama adopts the Mom-in-Chief persona in the "Let's Move" campaign. She constantly emphasizes her role as a mother in the campaign while understating the political implications associated with being a presidential wife. As Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Thomas R. Burkholder explain, "rhetors may take on particular identities or roles to strategically enhance their persuasive influence," that is, to enhance through bolstering their credibility.² In these three speeches, Obama takes on the identity of a mother to enhance her own credibility as a speaker, stressing her role as a mother rather than any of the other roles that were obviously available to her, such as spouse, first lady, or lawyer. In turn, the Mom-in-Chief persona draws on the mother archetype to create a nurturing, caring, and supportive persona. Most importantly, the mother archetype transcends cultural, racial, and historical boundaries. As Lynne Stearney explains, motherhood is an enduring ideal. The public's perception of an archetypal mother encompasses motherhood as an image that crosses "historical periods, social conditions, and cultural boundaries."³ Motherhood is

recognized and revered in every culture and religion and this transcending image enables Obama to overcome the rhetorical problems she faces.

In the “Launch” speech, Obama states that the “Let’s Move” campaign is “an issue that’s of great concern to [her] not just as a First Lady, but as a mom,” while emphasizing that childhood obesity threatens the future of young children and that “none of us wants this kind of future for our kids—or for our country.”⁴ Calling herself a “mom” invites her audience to see her as a mother rather than the president’s wife. In her speech delivered at the NAACP convention she says, “I wanted to talk with you about an issue that I believe cries out for our attention—one that is of particular concern to me, not just as First Lady, but as a mother who believes that we owe it to our kids to prepare them for the challenges that we know lie ahead,”⁵ once again affirming her role as mother. Most importantly, Obama presents the “Let’s Move” campaign as a personal matter to better the lives of her children and the nation’s children rather than a policy-driven agenda.

Obama uses the story of her own daughters to highlight her maternal role. She describes the time when her daughter’s doctor approached her about doing things differently at home, and explains “[t]hat was a moment of truth for me. It was a wakeup call that I was the one in charge.”⁶ Obama declares her “chief” role in the “Let’s Move” campaign by stating that she is in charge of her family and can make the necessary changes. She extends that by empowering all parents to realize that “[w]e’re in charge. We make these decisions”. Furthermore, in the “Anniversary” speech she states that “[w]hile we might not always feel like it, when it comes to our kids’ health and well-being, we’re the ones in charge.”⁷ In her address to the NAACP convention, as she did

earlier in the “Launch” speech, she again asserts the future negative implications of childhood obesity and that “none of us wants that kind of future for *our* kids or for *our* country.”⁸ This motherly duty, she explains, “is *our* obligation, not just as parents who love our kids, but as citizens who love this country. So let’s move. Let’s get this done. Let’s give our kids what they need to have the future they deserve.”⁹ Thus, she places the futures of young children as her top priority and emphasizes the needed concern from all parents.

In effort to empower parents, in the “Launch” speech she states that “our kids didn’t do this to themselves. Our kids didn’t decide what’s served to them at school or whether there’s time for gym class or recess. Our kids didn’t choose to make food products with tons of sugar and sodium in super-sized portions, and then to have those products marketed to them everywhere they turn.”¹⁰ Obama’s attempt to take the blame away from the children places her in a typical motherly role—the protector. Most importantly, she does not suggest political solutions. Rather, she reinforces her role as mother by stating that “[i]f we’re the ones who make the decisions, then we can decide to solve this problem. And when I say ‘we,’ I’m not just talking about folks here in Washington.”¹¹ Such statements reinforce Obama’s authority and credibility as mother rather than as the president’s wife. Edwin Black explains that when a speaker assumes a specific identity or persona, it allows the audience to grant the speaker the “moral or intellectual authority” associated with that persona.¹² Ultimately in these speeches, Obama stresses her authority or credibility in the campaign through her role as a mother rather than as a woman in politics which leads to the creation of a classic or archetypal image of motherhood.

Obama consistently reinforces the mother archetype throughout her “Let’s Move” campaign speeches. As Anthony Stevens explains, personal histories determine what anyone experiences in life. The personal histories are fundamentally “guided by the collective history of the human species as a whole,” and that collective history is encoded in the collective unconscious.¹³ Obama creates the mother archetype through her ability to establish the collective characteristics of a nurturing, directive, supporting and sacrificing mother.¹⁴ As the Mom-in-Chief, she emphasizes in the “Launch” speech, the importance of the campaign to her audience “[b]ecause we won’t just be keeping our kids healthy when they’re young. We’ll be teaching them habits to keep them healthy their entire lives.”¹⁵ Theoretically, the archetypal mother takes care for her child physically,¹⁶ offers care and protection for her children,¹⁷ and is the key factor in the survival of the child’s early states of life, given that the child is completely dependent on the mother figure for nourishment and protection.¹⁸ Throughout her “Let’s Move” speeches, Obama assumes the mother archetype and reveals her desire to keep kids healthy, not just at the initial stages but throughout their entire lives.

Obama stresses the livelihood of children and the importance of parents’ immediate action throughout her speeches. In her “Launch” speech she states that:

I don’t want our kids to live diminished lives because we failed to step up today. I don’t want them looking back decades from now and asking us, why didn’t you help us when you had a chance? Why didn’t you put us first when it mattered most? So much of what we all want for our kids isn’t within our control. We want them to succeed in everything they do.¹⁹

Obama's statement accentuates the mother archetype through stressing the importance of nurturing and caring for children. She adds in the "Anniversary" speech: "[t]hat's what we've always done in this country, we have struggled and sacrificed to leave something better for future generations. We've worked to give them opportunities that we never dreamed of for ourselves. And ultimately, that's what we're aiming to do with Let's Move!"²⁰ Consequently, she adopts the archetypal mother once again through her willingness to make sacrifices.²¹

Stearney describes the mother archetype as a symbolic representation of women's instinct to take care and nurture children, while "encompassing the female psychological aptitude for limitless love and self-sacrifice."²² From this perspective, the archetypal ideal of motherhood describes women as mothers first. Obama's statement in her address to the NAACP convention reaffirms the mother's role to "protect them from every hardship and spare them from every mistake," and to give our children and grandchildren the "opportunities that we never dreamed of for ourselves."²³ Statements such as these explain the sacrifices Obama is willing to make as Mom-in-Chief to ensure that children grow up in a safe and healthy environment. However, she is not only willing to take the motherly role for her own children, but all of America's children.

In the address at the NAACP convention, Obama asserts her role as mother and most importantly, Mom-in-Chief, by stating that she has "made improving the quality of our children's health one of my top priorities."²⁴ She says that even though the goals of the "Let's Move" campaign may seem too idealistic or ambitious, she aims to reach those goals and that "I am going to do everything that I can to ensure that we meet them."²⁵ Obama's constant emphasis on her role as mother rather than first lady, wife, or lawyer,

emphasizes her adopted Mom-in-Chief persona. Nowhere in her speeches is she speaking as a presidential wife, a successful lawyer, a hospital executive, or any other character. Throughout the three “Let’s Move” campaign speeches, she is a mother first and a First Lady second. Obama’s strategy of creating a mother persona allows her audience to recognize, and perhaps identify with, the mother archetype. Her narrative in the “Let’s Move” campaign speeches form a certain image in her audience’s mind that makes it difficult for one to think of anyone other than Michelle Obama when imagining the classical image of mother.

Most importantly, there is no mention of Obama as an African American woman. Although her address at the NAACP convention is clearly addressed to an African American audience, the experiences she shares are exactly the same as in the “Launch” and “Anniversary” speeches. In the NAACP speech she focuses on the statistics of childhood obesity within the African American community but the narrative she presents as a mother is once again the same. If one was to read the “Launch” and “Anniversary” speech texts on their own, it would be impossible to know that they were delivered by an African American woman. The experiences she presents could essentially be shared with any other American woman. Consequently, Obama’s ability to adopt such persona reduces the difficulty to identify with her audience.

Identification

As Michelle Obama pointed out when speaking to the group of schoolgirls in London, there are similarities between the first lady and the young schoolgirls.²⁶ Obama’s

persona presents the common experiences that she shared with the schoolgirls when she was their age. Their childhood and upbringing is emphasized as essentially the same. In her “Let’s Move” campaign speeches, Obama emphasizes the shared similarities with her audience as well. That audience constitutes American families. The emphasis on similar experiences and values allows Obama to transcend any racial, political, cultural, or religious boundaries. Thus the audience finds a way to relate to her due to her family values while almost overlooking her White House prestige.

As Kenneth Burke explains, people can identify with each other through their common experiences, ideologies, and values and to identify with someone creates consubstantiality. For Burke, “communication by the signs of consubstantiality, the appeal of identification,” links the speaker and the audience.²⁷ Obama links her common experiences and values with her audience through the “Let’s Move” campaign speeches. She begins her “Launch” speech by stating, “let me ask the adults here today to close your eyes and think back for a moment... think back to a time when *we* were growing up.”²⁸ From the beginning, she establishes commonalities between her audience and herself. She assumes that they were raised the same way and share similar childhood stories. For example, in the “Launch” speech, she explains that “[l]ike many of you, when I was young, we walked to school every day, rain or shine—and in Chicago, we did in wind, sleet, hail and snow too.”²⁹ Similarly, in her address to the NAACP convention she begins by stating that “[m]any of you probably grew up like I did—in a community that wasn’t rich, not even middle class, but where people knew their neighbors, and they looked out for each other’s kids.”³⁰ Likewise, in the “Anniversary” speech she asks her audience to

[T]hink back to when *we* were growing up. Back then, our TVs had only a few channels, when those Saturday morning cartoons were finished, you were done with TV for the day. Once American Bandstand and Soul Train were over, you headed outside to play and you didn't come home until dinner. Back then, *we* ate meals around the table as a family and that was pretty much the only time you ate, at mealtime.³¹

In doing so, she validates her humble upbringing. She composes an image in her audience's mind by asking them to "[r]emember how, at school, we had recess twice a day and gym class twice a week, and we spent hours running around outside when school got out..." or even when "we would gather around the table for dinner as a family."³² The stories she chooses to highlight from her own childhood parallel the common narratives of American families. Through her own adolescent accounts, Obama creates a nostalgic feeling to bring about "the good old times" to the forefront of her audience's mind. By assuming that her childhood resembles the childhood of her audience members, she establishes credibility by means of appealing to the middle-class American family.

Obama establishes credibility with middle-class American families by explaining that she didn't always have the lavish lifestyle before living in the White House. For example, in the "Launch" speech, she states that "[i]n my home, we weren't rich," as a bridge to claim that she understands the circumstances families deal with, because "I know what that feels like. I've been there. While today, I'm blessed with more help and support than I ever dreamed of, I didn't always live in the White House."³³ Obama's ability to relate to the American public's common experiences and values and identify with them makes her and the audience consubstantial.

For instance, if parents feel troubled for raising their children with unhealthy habits, Obama reassures them that they are not the only family to feel that way. Once again she aims to identify with her audience by explaining that even the Obamas have faced similar struggles. In her “Launch” speech she explains that:

So many parents desperately want to do the right thing, but they feel like the deck is stacked against them. They know their kids’ health is their responsibility—but they feel like it’s out of their control. They’re being bombarded by contradictory information at every turn, and they don’t know who or what to believe. The result is a lot of guilt and anxiety—and a sense that no matter what they do, it won’t be right, and it won’t be enough.³⁴

Although Obama’s statement insinuates that she is describing the common experiences of busy families, the underlying notion of the message is that her family faces the same troubles. By appealing to common America, Obama establishes similarities with her audience by stating that “[i]t wasn’t that long ago that I was a working Mom, struggling to balance meetings and deadlines with soccer and ballet. And there were some nights when everyone was tired and hungry, and we just went to the drive-thru because it was quick and cheap, or went with one of the less healthy microwave options, because it was easy.”³⁵ Obama’s statements portray her as a contemporary American mother, perhaps a “soccer mom,” in effort to identify with common American families.

Obama also reiterates in the “Anniversary” speech that she has also “been there.” She explains that she too was a “working mom” herself and is fully aware

that sometimes, much as we all hate to admit it, it's just easier to park the kids in front of the TV for a few hours, so we can pay the bills or do the laundry or just have some peace and quiet for a change. Sometimes, it's just easier to say yes to that extra snack or dessert, because frankly, it is exhausting to keep saying no. It's exhausting to plead with our kids to eat just one more bite of vegetables. It's exhausting to put in the effort to make a home-cooked meal when all they really want is something from the microwave or the drive-thru.³⁶

Obama confesses that “as parents today, *we* are just plain tired.” She continues by stating that “*we’re* working longer hours to make ends meet. *We’re* under more stress. *We* get home after a long day at work and the last thing on earth *we* want to do is fight with our kids about turning off the TV, or have endless negotiations about what’s for dinner.”³⁷ She shifts the blame away from the parents, however, by stating that “kids don’t come with an instruction manual,” “and while we get plenty of advice to make sure our kids eat well and stay active what does that really mean? How do we actually do that? Where do we find the time, where do we find the money?”³⁸ As a result, Obama’s narrative describes her family with the common characteristics of a contemporary family rather than a White House family.

When addressing the possible criticisms of the “Let’s Move” campaign’s strict diet, Obama assures the audience that this does not strive to cut out all the splurges of being a kid. For example, in her address to the NAACP convention she states that “no one wants to give up Sunday meal. No one wants to say goodbye to mac and cheese and fried chicken and mashed potatoes – oh, I’m getting hungry – forever. No one wants to do that. Not even the Obamas, trust me.”³⁹ By relating her family to those of others, she

removes the Obamas from the high presidential pedestal to characterize them as a typical American family. For comedic effect she adds, “Shoot, I can’t tell Malia and Sasha to eat their vegetables if I’m sitting around eating French fries – trust me, they will not let that happen. And I can’t tell them to go run around outside if I’m spending all of my free time on the couch watching TV.”⁴⁰ Through the use of humor, Obama again relates the family practices of the public to those of her own family.

Although Obama’s “Let’s Move” speech texts reveal that she identifies with her audience as American families, she uses constitutive rhetoric to create her audience by calling them into being responsible and active parents. As Maurice Charland argues, constitutive rhetoric “permits an understanding within rhetorical theory of ideological discourse, of the discourse that presents itself as always only pointing to the given, the natural, the already agreed upon.”⁴¹ Considering that the constitutive audience does not exist apart from the speech by which they are persuaded, this practice is especially beneficial for problematic audiences. Charland explains that the collective identities are constituted through a series of narratives positioning a “people” as subjects within a text.⁴²

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the audience Obama is presented with is not a universal audience, but rather a created one. The audience that Obama creates is one of “a people.” The “people” are empowered parents or individuals invested in supporting the efforts made by the “Let’s Move” campaign. Through the use of motivational language, Obama empowers her audience to “move” into the desired audience of the campaign.

Michelle Obama's use of identification strategies serves to construct the constitutive audience. Through the use of unifying language such as "we" and "our," Obama identifies with her audience but also helps bridge the gap within her audience members. For example, in the "Launch" speech, Obama states that "I'm talking about what *we* can do. I'm talking about commonsense steps *we* can take in our families and communities to help *our* kids lead active, healthy lives."⁴³ She later proclaims that the timeline of events for the campaign is long, "but we can't wait 90 days to get going here. So let's move right now, starting today, on a series of initiatives to help achieve *our* goal" in order "to get healthier food into *our* nation's schools."⁴⁴ In addition, "let's move to ensure that all of our families have access to healthy, affordable food in their communities."⁴⁵ By focusing on "our children" and "our nation" Obama emphasizes the audience's responsibility and instills the common goal of unifying her audience to fight the epidemic of childhood obesity together.

Similarly, in her address at the NAACP convention, Obama asks, "NAACP, will you move with me? Let's Move! I'm going to need you NAACP. This is not an endeavor that I can do by myself. We cannot change the health of our community alone," and "if we do this together, we can change the way our children think about their health forever."⁴⁶ The stressed importance of acting "together" constructs the audience Obama wishes to address and highlights the need for unification. The unification asks for all parents to join the movement—regardless of race, religion or political background. For example, in the "Anniversary" speech, Obama states that "we also have to remember that we're never alone," because the next time parents are battling with their children over eating their vegetables, "we have to remind ourselves that parents everywhere are going

through exactly the same thing. We have to remember that we're all in this together."⁴⁷ Most importantly, she stresses that "we need to help each other," "we need to share good ideas and cheer each other on," "and we need to get other parents involved in this cause."⁴⁸ The audience she is presenting is not constricted by any cultural, political or religious background. The audience members are brought together for one cause; to ensure that all children have access to healthy food.

In the "Anniversary" speech Obama concludes by saying that "if there's one message I want to send parents today, it's this: *We* have a voice. *We* have a voice. And when *we* come together to use that voice," we can change the current state of the problem. Specifically, "*we* can change the way companies do business," "*we* can change the way Congress makes laws," "*we* can transform *our* schools and *our* neighborhoods and *our* cities."⁴⁹ Most importantly, Obama urges "everyone to keep using that voice, keep standing up and demanding something better for *our* kids."⁵⁰ She states that "*we* have everything *we* need, right now, to help *our* kids lead healthy lives," because "rarely in history of this country have we encountered a problem of such magnitude and consequence that is eminently solvable."⁵¹ Thus, through the joining of parents, Obama can create the "Let's Move" audience. Obama's strategy to empower her audience parallels her Mom-in-Chief persona because she is highlighting the importance of parents' involvement by being a parent herself.

Lastly, she expands the created audience past the "parents." She asserts that this initiative is not just a campaign for parents "[b]ecause we're not just moms and dads," but we are also "Little League Coaches and Girl Scout leaders. We're parishioners and PTA members. We're educators and small business owners. And we need to bring our

perspective as parents to every single one of those roles.”⁵² She concludes her “Anniversary” speech by stating that as parents, we always strive to give children the best, “[a]nd as Americans, we want nothing less for this country. So let’s keep working. Let’s keep moving. And let’s keep doing everything we can to give our kids the bright futures they deserve.”⁵³ Once again, Obama undertakes the mother role to stress the importance of the campaign by unifying American families and lead them as the Mom-in-Chief.

Address at the NAACP convention

Although the “Launch” and “Anniversary” speeches do not make the speaker’s cultural or racial backgrounds evident, the address to the NAACP convention presents Obama with a unique audience with which she must make her race clearly distinguished. Considering the nature of the organization and thus the audience present at the convention, Obama constructs a more inclusive audience at her July 12, 2010 address. Given that the majority of her audience members are African American, Obama provides race-specific statistics and examples to stress the importance of the campaign to the African American community.

Obama provides historical insight by explaining that despite the end of slavery and Jim Crow laws, black children are still at risk of obesity and related illness because of a weak initiative to do anything about it in the African American community.⁵⁴ She explains that “African American children are significantly more likely to be obese than are white children,” while almost “half of African American children will develop diabetes at some point in their lives. People, that’s half of our children.”⁵⁵ Even though

she uses “our” as uniting language once again, the term “our” is used in the context of only black children. The importance of the campaign however is made clear through the large progress of the NAACP throughout the decades. Obama states that “if we don’t do something to reverse this trend right now, our kids won’t be in any shape to continue the work begun by the founders of this great organization.”⁵⁶ She highlights issues surrounding the African American community such as the need for “eliminating youth violence or stopping the spread of HIV/AIDS” and asserts that childhood obesity is just as a serious of a problem.⁵⁷

The most important historical reference in Obama’s address at the NAACP convention is the example of the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling. Neither of the two other speeches presents such a culture-specific example as the court ruling that ended segregated schools. In the NAACP address, however, Obama concludes her speech by stating that this “is why Thurgood Marshall fought so hard to ensure that children like Linda Brown, and children like my daughters and your sons and daughters, would never again know the cruel inequality of separate but equal.”⁵⁸ The end of the speech asserts that Obama is specifically uniting African American families to benefit African American children like her own. Ultimately, Obama’s address at the NAACP convention signifies identification with the African American community as she highlights her race and the race of her audience.

Conclusion

Michelle Obama's rhetorical strategies of persona and identification enable her to overcome the rhetorical problems she faces. Through the use of the Mom-in-Chief persona, Obama assumes the mother archetype by using language that emphasizes the well-being of all of the nation's children. Her nurturing and caring character and will to sacrifice for others epitomizes the mother archetype and most importantly allows her to transcend any historical, racial, religious, and political boundaries with which she is presented. The archetypal mother as Stearney explains, is capable of transcending cultural, historical, political, racial, and religious boundaries by drawing on images that underlie the public's understanding of motherhood.⁵⁹ Motherhood is essentially found in every religion, race, and culture and as James Chesebro, Dale Bertelsen, and Thomas Gencarelli claim, that "because of its pervasive and cross-cultural nature, motherhood can be understood as an archetype, or a symbol which transcends particular situations and constructs."⁶⁰ Thus, by focusing on her mother characteristic, Obama attempts to transcend the rhetorical problems of being a first lady and an African American woman.

Second, the use of unifying language allows the first lady to identify with the created or constitutive audience. By emphasizing the importance of parents' role in the campaign she establishes her audience to be American families. Her address to the NAACP convention however establishes a more specific, African American community as the constitutive audience rather than the common American "family." The family or "a people" as described by Charland serves to conceive a group of individuals as one. As Charland explains the collective identities of the audience are positioned to be a "people" through a series of narratives by the speaker.⁶¹ Constitutive rhetoric demonstrates how

public discourse creates subject positions that inescapably contain directives for action. In Obama's case, that directive action is to support the "Let's Move" campaign to help end childhood obesity.

Thus far, the "Let's Move" campaign is a crucial campaign for Michelle Obama. As a first lady, she faces the criticisms of being a woman unelected in a prestigious role of the White House. Although as first lady she is not required to champion social causes in the public arena, the public's contradictory expectations of presidential spouses virtually force Obama to get involved. As an African American woman however, Obama faces the stereotypes that have branded black women in America. The media's remarks regarding her athletic upper body and large posterior that seem more appropriate for "menial labor" than for the political arena,⁶² and implications behind the "angry black woman" remarks suggest that the U.S. has not reached a post-racial or post-feminist era yet. The compilation of these criticisms creates the rhetorical problems she faces as the current first lady. As a strategy to overcome these rhetorical problems, Obama's construction of the mother archetype through the rhetorical persona and the use of constitutive audience through identification allow her to transcend the criticisms when entering the public sphere.

Notes

¹ *The Telegraph*, “G20 summit: Michelle Obama tells children they are future world leaders,” (April 2, 2009). <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/michelle-obama/5096908/G20-summit-Michelle-Obama-tells-children-they-are-future-world-leaders.html>

² Karlyn Kohrs Campbell & Thomas R. Burkholder, *Critiques of Contemporary Rhetoric* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1997): 21

³ Lynn M. Stearney, “Feminism, Ecofeminism, and the Maternal Archetype: Motherhood as a Feminine Universal” *Communication Quarterly*, 42(2), (1994): 145-159

⁴ Michelle Obama, “Remarks of First Lady Michelle Obama: *Let’s Move!* Launch,” (February 9, 2010), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-first-lady-michelle-obama>, 1

⁵ Michelle Obama, “Remarks by the First Lady to the NAACP National Convention,” (July 12, 2010), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-first-lady-naacp-national-convention-kansas-city-missouri>, 2

⁶ Launch, 2

⁷ Michelle Obama, “Remarks of First Lady Michelle Obama: *Let’s Move!* Launch Anniversary Speech to Parents,” (February 9, 2011), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/02/09/remarks-first-lady-michelle-obama-let-s-move-launch-anniversary-speech-p>, 3

⁸ NAACP National Convention, 3 (italics added)

⁹ Launch, 5

¹⁰ Launch, 2

¹¹ Launch, 2

¹² Edwin Black. "The Second Persona." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 56(2), (1970): 111

¹³ Anthony Stevens, *The two-million-year-old self*. (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2009): 16.

¹⁴ Sarah Lynne Bowman, “The Dichotomy of the Great Mother Archetype in Disney Heroines and Villainesses,” In *Vader, Voldemort, and Other Villains: Essays on Evil in Popular Media*, ed. Heit, Jamey, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011): 80–96

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- ¹⁵ Launch, 5
- ¹⁶ Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*. (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1989): 19
- ¹⁷ Jack Lule, *Daily News, External Stories: The Mythological Role of Journalism*. (New York: Guilford, 2001)
- ¹⁸ Lule, *Daily News, External Stories: The Mythological Role of Journalism*.
- ¹⁹ Launch, 5
- ²⁰ Anniversary, 5
- ²¹ Sarah Lynne Bowman, "The Dichotomy of the Great Mother Archetype in Disney Heroines and Villainesses," In *Vader, Voldemort, and Other Villains: Essays on Evil in Popular Media*, ed. Heit, Jamey, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011): 80–96
- ²² Lynn M. Stearney, "Feminism, Ecofeminism, and the Maternal Archetype: Motherhood as a Feminine Universal" *Communication Quarterly*, 42(2), (1994): 145-159
- ²³ NAACP National Convention, 1
- ²⁴ NAACP National Convention, 4
- ²⁵ NAACP National Convention, 5
- ²⁶ *The Telegraph*, "G20 summit: Michelle Obama tells children they are future world leaders," (April 2, 2009). <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/michelle-obama/5096908/G20-summit-Michelle-Obama-tells-children-they-are-future-world-leaders.html>
- ²⁷ Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1950): 21
- ²⁸ Launch, 1 (italics added)
- ²⁹ Launch, 2
- ³⁰ NAACP National Convention, 2
- ³¹ Anniversary, 2 (italics added)
- ³² Launch, 2
- ³³ Launch, 2
- ³⁴ Launch, 2
- ³⁵ Launch, 2

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- ³⁶ Anniversary, 3
- ³⁷ Anniversary, 2-3 (italics added)
- ³⁸ Anniversary, 2
- ³⁹ NAACP National Convention, 5
- ⁴⁰ NAACP National Convention, 6
- ⁴¹ Maurice Charland, “Constitutive rhetoric: The case of the *peuple québécois*,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73(2), (1987): 133
- ⁴² Jacqueline Bacon, “‘Acting as Freemen’: Rhetoric, Race, and Reform in the Debate over Colonization in Freedom’s Journal, 1827-1828,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 93(1), (2007): 58-83
- ⁴³ Launch, 2 (italics added)
- ⁴⁴ Launch, 3(italics added)
- ⁴⁵ Launch, 4
- ⁴⁶ NAACP National Convention, 7
- ⁴⁷ Anniversary, 4
- ⁴⁸ Anniversary, 4
- ⁴⁹ Anniversary, 4 (italics added)
- ⁵⁰ Anniversary, 4
- ⁵¹ Launch, 5
- ⁵² Anniversary, 4
- ⁵³ Anniversary, 5
- ⁵⁴ NAACP National Convention, 2
- ⁵⁵ NAACP National Convention, 2
- ⁵⁶ NAACP National Convention, 2
- ⁵⁷ NAACP National Convention, 2
- ⁵⁸ NAACP National Convention, 7
- ⁵⁹ Lynn M. Stearney, “Feminism, Ecofeminism, and the Maternal Archetype: Motherhood as a Feminine Universal” *Communication Quarterly*, 42(2), (1994): 145-159
- ⁶⁰ James Chesebro, Dale Bertelsen, and Thomas Cencarelli, “Archetypal criticism.” *Communication Education*, 39, (1990): 261-262

⁶¹ Jacqueline Bacon, “‘Acting as Freeman’’: Rhetoric, Race, and Reform in the Debate over Colonization in Freedom’s Journal, 1827-1828,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 93(1), (2007): 58-83

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CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

This project began as an attempt to understand the multifaceted and complex role of First Ladies. My fascination with the historical foundation of the presidential wives led me to examine more closely the woman behind the leader of the nation. As the first African American First Lady, her role in the public arena is crucial in paving the way for future presidential spouses but also for African American women. The “Let’s Move” campaign serves as a solid representation of Obama’s role in the public sphere. Through the campaign, she can act independently of her husband and establish credibility as a speaker. This final chapter reviews the material covered in the study and discusses the implications of Michelle Obama’s rhetorical persona and use of identification.

Review

Chapter One introduced Michelle Obama and her “Let’s Move” campaign as the subject of analysis. The role of eighteenth and nineteenth century women was used to explain the cult of true womanhood and the revolt by suffragists who eventually led the crusade for the passing of the 19th Amendment. The twentieth century woman embraced the publication of the *Feminine Mystique* and led new movements to encourage social reform and personal improvement through the “personal is political” idiom. The role of women exemplified the consistent double bind or public’s expectations of women to simultaneously portray the traditional roles of womanhood with modern ones. Considering the changing role of womanhood throughout the centuries, a brief

introduction of first ladies was included to shed light into the changing roles of first ladies who helped define the evolving notions of womanhood. The remaining literature review focused on African American stereotypes and a background of Michelle Obama and the “Let’s Move” campaign. I contended that a rhetorical analysis of the campaign’s speeches exhibits the unique strategies the contemporary first lady embarks. The strategies are aimed to tackle the double bind that expects her to be the educated, professional woman in the White House and yet criticizes her for any activity that deviates from the woman’s realm of politics.

In an attempt to understand the rhetorical problems Michelle Obama faces, Chapter Two placed the criticisms of first ladies and African American women in their corresponding contexts. The lack of public consensus on the expectations for a first lady becomes troublesome given that it is impossible to know how much or how little involvement is necessary. An examination of the criticisms presidential wives endure revealed four major themes. First ladies were deemed as a) playing a non-traditional role centered on the “too powerful” persona, b) the center of a scandal, c) an extravagant spender, and d) a hidden figure. The other facet of Michelle Obama’s contextualization focused on the stereotypes of African American women which revealed the Mammy, Sapphire, Jezebel, and newly constructed Strong Black Woman label. Lastly, Obama was often attacked for her physical features, pricey vacations and for being an angry black woman. These criticisms collectively explain the rhetorical problems Obama faces when entering the public sphere.

Chapter Three detailed the theoretical implications for analyzing the “Let’s Move” campaign speeches. The rhetorical persona and identification explained the

strategies Obama used to establish her credibility. The rhetorical persona of Mom-in-Chief as a means to create the mother archetype assisted in transcending racial boundaries by bringing the image of mother to the forefront of the audience's mind, making it extremely difficult to think of anything other than that archetype. Burke's definition of identification was used as a means to explain the created or constitutive audience. Thus, the rhetorical *persona* and *identification* created the theoretical framework to analyze Obama's three addresses on the "Let's Move" campaign.

Finally, Chapter Four was a comprehensive analysis of Obama's major speeches within the first year of the "Let's Move" campaign. The "Launch" speech, the address to the NAACP convention, and the "Anniversary" speech exemplified the construction of the Mom-in-Chief persona to form the image of an archetypal mother. Additionally, the unifying language helped Obama to identify with and constitute her audience. These strategies aided Obama in establishing her credibility as a rhetor. Ultimately, in order to overcome the rhetorical problems associated with First Ladies enacting agendas that extend them beyond the woman's realm of politics—women's issues and family—Obama engages in a campaign that strictly focuses on families. Through this strategy, Obama is essentially giving the public what they want.

Results and Implications

The analysis of the "Let's Move" campaign speeches produces several valuable insights for the field of rhetorical studies. First, examination of the rhetorical persona aids in understanding how contemporary speakers develop their "mask" to highlight a specific

character. As Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Thomas R. Burkholder explain, that persona is the role a speaker takes in order to achieve a strategic purpose, often reached through the use of language.¹ Michelle Obama's strategic purpose is to establish credibility to create larger support for the "Let's Move" campaign. In this sense, when Obama assumes the particular role of mother, the audience grants her the moral or intellectual authority associated with motherhood. This persona utilizes the desired image the rhetor wants the audience to view, as a strategic and persuasive tool. Specifically, when the persona represents an identifiable archetype, they associate the rhetor with the classical image in the audience's mind.

The most significant aspect of the mother archetype is the ability to transcend any boundaries with which she is presented. Lynne Stearney's explanation of the mother archetype assures that the images that underlie the public's understanding of motherhood "cross historical periods, social conditions, and cultural boundaries."² Thus, Obama's ability to undertake such a universal role allows her audience to view her as the universally-agreed upon symbol—the mother. Essentially, Obama and speakers who face similar rhetorical problems are able to present a universal symbol to avoid being labeled by the characteristic that they wish to avoid. For example, Obama's racial transcendence creates a ubiquitous image that allows her audience to view her as a universal mother without regard to race, religion, or history. In that sense, the mother archetype creates a colorblind audience.

Second, Burke's definition of identification aids in understanding how a constitutive audience of parents is constructed. The emphasis of "we" and "our" creates an interesting paradigm of how uniting language can achieve identification and empower

an audience. Through the empowerment of American families, Obama can create the desired audience by appealing to their common experiences and values. Obama's identification or making specific features of ones' self "consubstantial" with others allows her to create a constitutive audience.³ The more the audience views Obama as one of the "people" that she has created, the more consubstantial she becomes with that audience. Thus, identification and consubstantiality allows her to empower the audience.

As Maurice Charland argues, the practice of constitutive rhetoric can be especially beneficial when the identity of that audience is problematic.⁴ Critics of Obama condemn her for her sleeveless dresses, her mixing of different types of china for the state dinners, perceived Big Brother agenda, and for simply being African American. The American audience has diverse perceptions of the First Lady which can become problematic when the audience remains divided. Her ability to unite her audience as American families rather than members of different races, religions, and political parties, allows her to create her desired audience—an audience with which she shares common experiences and values. Thus, by creating a "people," she transcends the possible discernments.

Third, this analysis helps us understand the complicated roles of first ladies. The limited research devoted to presidential wives often leaves the public with a negative perception of these women. Although first ladies are unelected, unappointed, and unpaid, they serve a significant role in American society. They set precedents and serve as the models of womanhood for their time. Considering that presidential spouses create the ideal of womanhood, it becomes interesting when examining the rather traditional roles these women play. As a whole, first ladies are confined to the "social hostess," "spouse,"

and policy maker roles only in the matter that concerns woman's issues such as the family. Any deviation from this expectation results in labels such as "inappropriate" and "unladylike." Even though the cult of true womanhood may seem to be an outdated model, it is an altered version of this nineteenth century concept that still lurks society's perception of womanhood and thus the first ladyship. Consequently, Obama's corresponding agenda to make children and the family her main concern, confines her to the woman's realm of politics. However, considering that she is the first African American in this position, embracing a "safe" cause becomes more beneficial.

Lastly, this study contributes to our understanding of Michelle Obama as a rhetor. Through her carefully constructed speeches, we can view her strategic use of the Mom-in-Chief persona and use of identification as an attempt to establish her credibility. More importantly, as a contemporary woman's leader she lays out the ground work for future first ladies and sets a precedent of the public perception of African American women. The Mom-in-Chief's insistence on the "mother" character rather than any other persona emphasizes the move away from the political field and a stronger shift into the "family." After all, policy makers will try to persuade the audience for the sake of their own benefits but when the issue concerns the family, mother always knows best.

Notes

¹Karlyn Kohrs Campbell & Thomas R. Burkholder, *Critiques of Contemporary Rhetoric* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1997): 21

²Lynn M. Stearney, "Feminism, Ecofeminism, and the Maternal Archetype: Motherhood as Feminine Universal" *Communication Quarterly*, 42(2), (1994): 145-159

³Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1950): 21

⁴Maurice Charland, "Constitutive rhetoric: The case of the *peuple québécois*," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73(2), (1987): 133

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