

**UCLA**

**CSW Update Newsletter**

**Title**

Media Representations of Michelle Obama

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1kg651b3>

**Author**

Brannon, Taquesha

**Publication Date**

2011

# MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF MICHELLE OBAMA

*From the Angry/Strong Black Woman to the New American Icon*



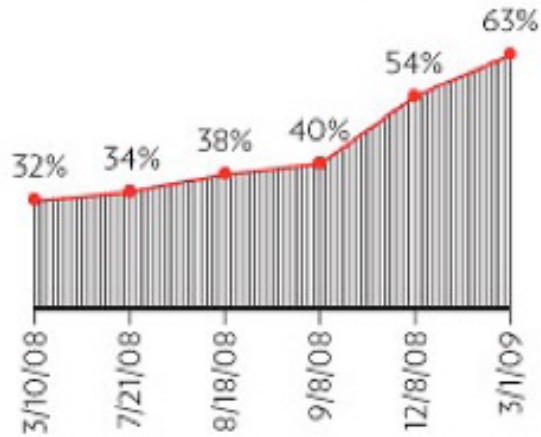
**A**s shown by this excerpt from an article by Jodi Kantor in the *New York Times*, the management and construction of Michelle Obama's image during the 2008

presidential campaign was elaborately orchestrated and meticulously calculated. It was important to create a 'charm offensive' that rivaled the efforts to conjure support for presidential candidates, 'not

***[Michelle Obama] is at the center of a multimedia charm offensive that may be the most closely managed spousal rollout in presidential campaign history. On Monday night, Mrs. Obama delivered a prime-time speech at the Democratic National Convention, preceded by an intricately made biographical video, a touch usually afforded to candidates, not their wives.***

**– Jodi Kantor, *New York Times***

## Michelle Obama's Favorability Ratings



SOURCE: NBC News/  
Wall Street Journal poll

their wives', was a motivated response to negative portrayals of Mrs. Obama that served to threaten Barack Obama's historic campaign. As evidenced by favorability ratings (*shown above*) that nearly doubled in one year from 32% (3/10/08) to 63% (3/1/2009) in the NBC News/Wall Street Journal Polls, these elaborate and carefully crafted attempts to manage Mrs. Obama's image successfully transformed her from a potential threat to an astonishing asset to the campaign.

This essay examines the shift in the construction of Mrs. Obama's image over time,

and postulates that the observed increase in her favorability is related to a change in earlier media representations that emphasized her black, racial identity to later media representations that highlighted her female, gender identity. Building on research in several disciplines that demonstrates that femininity and womanhood are constructs that are highly associated with whiteness (Hull et al. 1982; Goff et al. 2008; Palmer 1983), I investigate how media representations of Michelle Obama have changed over time. Further, I examine how such changes might relate to U.S. understandings of gender that have historically been predicated on particular representations that have excluded and vilified African American women. These questions are informed by the work of Hunt (2005) and Hall (1996) which conceptualizes race in the U.S. through chains of equivalence, a representation of the black-white binary that links blackness with badness and whiteness with goodness.

Merging these insights on race and gender, it follows that whiteness is a construct that is linked to femininity and goodness; whereas, blackness is a construct that is linked to masculinity and badness. The popular media which often contains representations of black females that invoke stereotypes that emphasize traits such as 'an-

gry' and 'strong' reinforce the association between blackness, masculinity, and badness by presenting images of black women that are masculinized and stigmatized (Madison 2009; West 1995; Collins 2005). In the current study, I ask how these stereotypical representations of black womanhood mapped on to Michelle Obama's identity in the media over time. I postulate that media constructions of her identity which are consistent with these stereotypical representations of black womanhood occurred early in the campaign and coincided with an unfavorable public attitude toward her.

By contrast, I propose that media constructions of Michelle Obama's identity which are consistent with white womanhood occurred later in the campaign, when the public's attitude toward her became more favorable. I examine 'ideal mother', 'fashion icon', and the 'first lady role' as representations of white womanhood that are feminized and endorsed in the media (Roberts 1993; Burns 2008). Over time, representations of American womanhood have been mapped on to Mrs. Obama's identity in the media. The change in construction over time has coincided with (and I argue, significantly influenced), the increasingly favorable perception of her by the public, as 2009 NBC News/Wall Street Journal Polls have shown.

For this study, I used content analysis to measure the frequency of representations that have mapped on to Mrs. Obama's racial (i.e., 'angry' and 'strong') or gender (i.e., 'ideal mother', 'fashion icon', and the 'first lady role') identity in both the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*. In order to assess changes in Mrs. Obama's image, the time frame from February 10<sup>th</sup>, 2007 to December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2009 was split into four distinct periods. The first time period is when Barack Obama declared his candidacy for president up until he was elected as the presumptive nominee for president (February 10<sup>th</sup>, 2007 to June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2008). The second time period is after Mr. Obama is declared presumptive nominee for president up until the election (June 4<sup>th</sup>, 2008 to November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2008). The third time period is after the election up until Mr. Obama's first six months in office (November 5, 2008 to June 30, 2009). The fourth time period is the last six months of Mr. Obama's first year in office (July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2009 to December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2009). Additionally, articles from both newspapers were analyzed in order to observe the presence of the following four possible frames: 1) angry/strong black woman; 2) ideal mother; 3) fashion icon; and 4) first lady role/performance.

Given that as the first African American

**Given that as the first African American First Lady, Michelle Obama is uniquely positioned to shatter black female stereotypes, media representations that reinforce the black-white binary dampen this potential.**

First Lady, Michelle Obama is uniquely positioned to shatter black female stereotypes, media representations that reinforce the black-white binary dampen this potential. Such that constructions of Mrs. Obama's identity that uphold the black-white binary by likening blackness to negative associations and whiteness to positive associations serve to sustain the notion that blackness is bad/inferior, whereas whiteness is good/superior.

The data revealed that the way Michelle Obama was portrayed has changed over time in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*. For both newspapers in this study, angry/strong black woman was the dominant frame during the first and second time periods; however, angry/strong black woman was not prevalent within the third and fourth time periods. These findings sup-

port my hypothesis because these earlier media representations of Mrs. Obama as an angry/strong black woman focused on her black, racial identity; her favorability ratings were low during these periods.

During the third time period, ideal mother and fashion icon were the dominant frames for both newspapers. Additionally during the fourth time period, the dominant frame for both newspapers was the first lady role/performance. These findings support my hypothesis that because these later media representations of Mrs. Obama as an ideal mother, a fashion icon, and a favorable first lady focused on to her gender identity instead of her black, racial identity; her favorability ratings were increasing during these periods.

This study showcases how race and gender are conceptualized through binaries in

***In order to make Mrs. Obama more appealing to mainstream Americans, campaign managers accentuated her female identity rather than her racial identity. This was achieved by creating an intervention that would disconnect her from mapping on to blackness.***

the United States, and how these binaries affect the ways in which black women are treated in this country. The racial binary equates whiteness with being good/superior and blackness with being bad/inferior, whereas the gender binary associates maleness with masculinity and femaleness with femininity. It is important to note that these binaries are not mutually exclusive because there are different social meanings attached to what it means to be a white male versus a black male or a white woman versus a black woman in society. Specifically in the case of white and black women, the former have been socially constructed as feminine, whereas the latter has been socially constructed as masculine.

Results from this study further highlights how racial and gender binaries are not mu-

tually exclusive. Earlier media representations of Michelle Obama were linked to black female stereotypes, which emphasized her racialized gender identity. These representations of Mrs. Obama as an angry/strong black woman excluded her from the traditional ideals of white womanhood and these images also mapped on to her black identity because she was viewed as masculine and deviant in the media. Thus, the consequences of these images resulted in Mrs. Obama receiving negative press and low favorability ratings. For example, the portrayal of Mrs. Obama as an angry/strong black woman was the dominant frame for articles in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* from the time Mr. Obama declared his candidacy up until the election (February 10, 2007 to November 4, 2008).

The press is highly influential in shaping the public's opinions and the dominance of these representations in the press played a role in the public's low acceptance of her and campaign managers' urgent need to re-shape her image in the media.

The push to revamp Mrs. Obama's image as an angry/strong black woman bolsters the belief that stigmatized behavior associated with blackness should be controlled and policed in society. Looking back at the chains of equivalence, which links negative characteristics associated with blackness, Mrs. Obama was seen as "African, savage, emotional, inferior, and slave" (Hunt 2005:3) when she was portrayed as an angry/strong black woman. In order to make Mrs. Obama more appealing to mainstream Americans, campaign managers accentuated her female identity rather than her racial identity. This was achieved by creating an intervention that would disconnect her from mapping on to blackness. This intervention involved reshaping Mrs. Obama's image so that she would map on to white womanhood. The underlying problem with this intervention is that it reinforces the black-white binary in which blackness is bad/deviant and whiteness is good/superior. For example, Mrs. Obama was rewarded with ascending favorability ratings and positive press when

she was portrayed as an ideal mother, a fashion icon, and a favorable first lady. This notion is supported by the study's results, which illustrate that the angry/strong black woman frame became significantly less prevalent as the ideal mother, the fashion icon, and the first lady role/performance frames became the dominant frames of articles in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* from the time after the election to the end of the Obamas' first year in office (November 5, 2008, to December 31, 2009).

On the other hand, the framing of Michelle Obama as an ideal mother, a fashion icon, and a favorable first lady in the newspaper articles also broadens society's view of black women and these positive representations of Mrs. Obama serves an opportunity for dismantling negative representations of black womanhood. First of all, this framing of Mrs. Obama as an ideal mother places her in a distinctive position because she serves as a model for helping to shatter the stereotypical dichotomy of showcasing black women as bad mothers and white women as good mothers. Secondly, the framing of Mrs. Obama as a fashion icon is a great feat because this representation has the potential to expand society's vi-

sion of beauty standards. As a fashion icon, Mrs. Obama disrupts the myth that black women are not marketable enough to represent high-end fashion, an arena typically reserved for white women. Mrs. Obama has made history by appearing on the cover of *Vogue*, an elite fashion magazine, and this achievement brings forth the opportunity for more black women to be shown as glamorous and beautiful in the media. Finally, Mrs. Obama's role as the first African American first lady is a major victory because she has been granted entrance into the ultimate embodiment of "True Womanhood" and the high visibility of this role gives mainstream Americans a chance to see her as an exceptional mother, a fashionable trendsetter, and a supportive wife.

**Taquesha Brannon earned her M.A. in Afro-American Studies in 2010. She was awarded a CSW travel grant to present her thesis findings on First Lady Michelle Obama at the National Council for Black Studies conference in New Orleans, LA.**

Photo credit: On page 22, official portrait of First Lady Michelle Obama taken by Joyce N. Boghosian, White House photographer.

## REFERENCES

Burns, Lisa M. 2008. *First Ladies and the Fourth Estate: Press Framing of Presidential Wives.*

- DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. 2005. *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism.* New York & London: Routledge.
- Goff, Phillip A., Margaret A. Thomas, and Matthew Christian Jackson. 2008. "'Ain't I a Woman?': Towards an Intersectional Approach to Person Perception and Group-Based Harms." *Sex Roles* 59:392-403.
- Hall, Stuart. 1996. "Race, the Floating Signifier," videotaped lecture. Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation.
- Hull, Gloria T., Scott, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith. 1982. *But Some of Us a Brave: Black Women's Studies.* New York: The Feminist Press.
- Hunt, Darnell M. 2005. *Channeling Blackness: Studies on Television and Race in America.* New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, Inc.
- Kantor, Jodi. 2008. "Michelle Obama, Now a Softer Presence, Adopts Twin Agendas." *The New York Times*, August 26, pp. 14. (Retrieved from Lexis/Nexis Academic on January 20, 2010.)
- Madison, D. Soyini. 2009. "Crazy Patriotism and Angry (Post) Black Women." *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 6 (3):321-326.
- Palmer, Phyllis Marynick. 1983. "White Women/Black Women: The Dualism of Female Identity and Experience in the United States." *Feminist Studies* 9 (1): 151-170.
- Roberts, Dorothy E. 1993. "Racism and Patriarchy in the Meaning of Motherhood." *American University Journal of Gender and the Law* 1:1-3.
- West, Carolyn M. 1995. "Mammy, Sapphire, and Jezebel: Historical Images of Black Women and their Implications for Psychotherapy." *Psychotherapy* 32: 458-466.